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MRS. EBBSMITH

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THE NOTORIOUS
MRS. EBBSMITH

A DRAMA
In Four Acts

By ARTHUR W. PINERO

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

MDCCCXCV

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Entered at Stationer's Hall

*Entered at the Library of Con-
gress, Washington, U.S.A.*

*This Play was produced at
the Garrick Theatre on Wed-
nesday, March 13th, 1895*

.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

AGNES.

LUCAS CLEEVE.

SYBIL CLEEVE.

SIR SANDFORD CLEEVE.

DUKE OF ST. OLPHERTS.

GERTRUDE THORPE.

REV. AMOS WINTERFIELD.

SIR GEORGE BRODRICK.

DR. KIRKE.

FORTUNÉ.

ANTONIO POPPI.

NELLA.

HEPHZIBAH.

.

The Scene is laid in Venice—first at the Palazzo Arconati, a lodging-house on the Grand Canal; afterwards in an apartment in the Campo S. Bartolomeo.

It is Easter-tide, a week passing between the events of the First and Second Acts.

THE
NOTORIOUS MRS. EBBSMITH

THE FIRST ACT

The Scene is a room in the Palazzo Arconati, on the Grand Canal, Venice. The room itself is beautiful in its decayed grandeur, but the furniture and hangings are either tawdry and meretricious or avowedly modern. The three windows at the back open on to a narrow covered balcony, or loggia, and through them can be seen the west side of the canal. Between recessed double doors on either side of the room is a fireplace out of use and a marble mantelpiece, but a tiled stove is used for a wood fire. Breakfast things are laid on a table. The sun streams into the room.

ANTONIO POPPI and NELLA, two Venetian servants, with a touch of the picturesque in their attire, are engaged in clearing the breakfast-table

NELLA.

[*Turning her head.*] Ascolta! (Listen!)

ANTONIO.

Una gondola allo scalo. (A gondola at our steps.)
[*They open the centre-window, go out on to the balcony, and look down below.*] La Signora Thorpe. (The Signora Thorpe.)

NELLA.

Con suo fratello. (With her brother.)

ANTONIO.

[*Calling.*] Buon di, Signor Winterfield! Iddio la benedica! (Good day, Signor Winterfield! The blessing of God be upon you!)

NELLA.

[*Calling.*] Buon di, Signora! La Madonna l'assista! (Good day, Signora! May the Virgin have you in her keeping!)

ANTONIO.

[*Returning to the room.*] Noi siamo in ritardo di tutto questa mattina. (We are behindhand with everything this morning.)

NELLA.

[*Following him.*] È vero. (That is true.)

ANTONIO.

[*Bustling about.*] La stufa ! (The stove.)

NELLA.

[*Throwing wood into the stove.*] Che tu sia benedetta per rammentarmelo ! Questi Inglesi non si contentono del sole. (Bless you for remembering it. These English are not content with the sun.)

[*Leaving only a vase of flowers upon the table, they hurry out with the breakfast things.* At the same moment, FORTUNÉ, a manservant, enters, showing in MRS. THORPE and the REV. AMOS WINTERFIELD. GERTRUDE THORPE is a pretty, frank-looking young woman of about seven-and-twenty. She is in mourning, and has sorrowful eyes and a complexion that is too delicate, but natural cheerfulness and brightness are seen through all. AMOS is about forty—big, burly, gruff; he is untidily dressed, and has a pipe in his hand. FORTUNÉ is carrying a pair of freshly-cleaned tan-coloured boots upon boot-trees.

GERTRUDE.

Now, Fortuné, you ought to have told us downstairs that Dr. Kirke is with Mrs. Cleeve.

AMOS.

Come away, Gerty. Mrs. Cleeve can't want to be bored with us just now.

FORTUNÉ.

Mrs. Cleeve give 'er ordares she is always to be bored wiz Madame Thorpe and Mr. Winterfield.

AMOS.

Ha, ha!

GERTRUDE.

[*Smiling.*] Fortuné!

FORTUNÉ.

Besides, ~~æ~~ doctares vill go in 'alf a minute, you see.

GERTRUDE.

Doctors!

AMOS.

What, is there another doctor with Dr. Kirke?

FORTUNÉ.

Ze great physician, Sir Brodrick.

GERTRUDE.

Sir George Brodrick? Amos!

AMOS

Doesn't Mr. Cleeve feel so well?

FORTUNÉ.

Oh, yes. But Mrs. Cleeve 'appen to read in a newspapare zat Sir George Brodrick vas in Florence for ze Pâque—ze Eastare. Sir Brodrick vas Mr. Cleeve's doctare in London, Mrs. Cleeve tell me, so 'e is acquainted wiz Mr. Cleeve's inside.

AMOS.

Ho, ho!

GERTRUDE.

Mr. Cleeve's constitution, Fortuné.

FORTUNÉ.

Excuse, madame. Zerefore Mrs. Cleeve she telegraph for Sir Brodrick to come to Venise.

AMOS.

To consult with Dr. Kirke, I suppose.

FORTUNÉ.

[*Listening.*] 'Ere is ze doctares.

DR. KIRKE *enters, followed by* SIR GEORGE BRODRICK.

KIRKE *is a shabby, snuff-taking old gentleman—blunt but kind; SIR GEORGE, on the contrary, is scrupulously neat in his dress, and has a suave, professional manner. FORTUNÉ withdraws.*

KIRKE.

Good morning, Mr. Winterfield. [*To GERTRUDE.*] How do you do, my dear? You're getting some colour into your pretty face, I'm glad to see. [*To SIR GEORGE.*] Mr. Winterfield—Sir George Brodick.

[*SIR GEORGE and AMOS shake hands.*

KIRKE.

[*To SIR GEORGE.*] Mrs. Thorpe. [*SIR GEORGE shakes hands with GERTRUDE.*] Sir George and I started life together in London years ago; now he finds me here in Venice. Well, we can't all win the race—eh?

SIR GEORGE.

My dear old friend! [*To GERTRUDE.*] Mr. Cleeve has been telling me, Mrs. Thorpe, how exceedingly kind you and your brother have been to him during his illness.

GERTRUDE.

Oh, Mr. Cleeve exaggerates our little services.

AMOS.

I've done nothing.

GERTRUDE.

Nor I.

DR. KIRKE.

Now, my dear!

GERTRUDE.

Dr. Kirke, you weren't in Florence with us; you're only a tale-bearer.

DR. KIRKE.

Well, I've excellent authority for my story of a young woman who volunteered to share the nursing of an invalid at a time when she herself stood greatly in need of being nursed.

GERTRUDE.

Nonsense! [*To SIR GEORGE.*] You know, Amos—

my big brother over there—Amos and I struck up an acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. Cleeve at Florence, at the Hotel d'Italie, and occasionally one of us would give Mr. Cleeve his dose while poor Mrs. Cleeve took a little rest or a drive—but positively that's all.

DR. KIRKE.

You don't tell us——

GERTRUDE.

I've nothing more to tell, except that I'm awfully fond of Mrs. Cleeve——

AMOS.

Oh, if you once get my sister on the subject of Mrs. Cleeve——

[Taking up a newspaper.]

GERTRUDE.

[To SIR GEORGE.] Yes, I always say that if I were a man searching for a wife, I should be inclined to base my ideal on Mrs. Cleeve.

SIR GEORGE.

[Edging away towards KIRKE, with a surprised, uncomfortable smile.] Eh? Really?

GERTRUDE.

You conceive a different ideal, Sir George?

SIR GEORGE.

Oh—well——

GERTRUDE.

Well, Sir George?

AMOS.

Perhaps Sir George has heard that Mrs. Cleeve holds regrettable opinions on some points. If so, he may feel surprised that a parson's sister——

GERTRUDE.

Oh, I don't share all Mrs. Cleeve's views, or sympathise with them, of course. But they succeed only in making me sad and sorry. Mrs. Cleeve's opinions don't stop me from loving the gentle, sweet woman; admiring her for her patient, absorbing devotion to her husband; wondering at the beautiful stillness with which she seems to glide through life——!

AMOS.

[*Putting down the newspaper, to SIR GEORGE and KIRKE.*] I told you so! [*To GERTRUDE.*] Gertrude,

I'm sure Sir George and Dr. Kirke want to be left together for a few minutes.

GERTRUDE.

[*Going up to the window.*] I'll sun myself on the balcony.

AMOS.

And I'll go and buy some tobacco. [*To GERTRUDE.*] Don't be long, Gerty. [*Nodding to SIR GEORGE and KIRKE.*] Good morning.

[*They return his nod ; and he goes out.*]

GERTRUDE.

[*On the balcony.*] Dr. Kirke, I've heard what doctors' consultations consist of. After looking at the pictures, you talk about whist.

[*She closes the window and sits outside.*]

KIRKE.

[*Producing his snuff-box.*] Ha, ha !

SIR GEORGE.

Why, this lady and her brother evidently haven't the faintest suspicion of the actual truth, my dear Kirke !

KIRKE.

[*Taking snuff.*] Not the slightest.

SIR GEORGE.

The woman made a point of being extremely explicit with you, you tell me ?

KIRKE.

Yes, she was plain enough with me. At our first meeting she said : " Doctor, I want you to know so-and-so, and so-and-so, and so-and-so."

SIR GEORGE.

Really? Well, it certainly isn't fair of Cleeve and his—his associate to trick decent people like Mrs. Thorpe and her brother. Good gracious, the brother is a clergyman too !

KIRKE.

The rector of some dull hole in the north of England.

SIR GEORGE.

Really !

KIRKE.

A bachelor ; this Mrs. Thorpe keeps house for him. She's a widow.

SIR GEORGE.

Really?

KIRKE.

Widow of a captain in the army. Poor thing! She's lately lost her only child and can't get over it.

SIR GEORGE.

Indeed, really, really? . . . But about Cleeve, now—he had Roman fever of rather a severe type?

KIRKE.

In November. And then that fool of a Bickerstaff at Rome allowed the woman to move him to Florence too soon, and there he had a relapse. However, when she brought him on here the man was practically well.

SIR GEORGE.

The difficulty being to convince him of the fact, eh? A highly-strung, emotional creature?

KIRKE.

You've hit him.

SIR GEORGE.

I've known him from his childhood. Are you still giving him anything?

KIRKE.

A little quinine, to humour him.

SIR GEORGE.

Exactly. [*Looking at his watch.*] Where is she ? where is she ? I've promised to take my wife shopping in the Mercéria this morning. By the bye, Kirke—I must talk scandal, I find—*this* is rather an odd circumstance. Whom do you think I got a bow from as I passed through the hall of the Danieli last night ? [KIRKE *grunts and shakes his head.*] The Duke of St. Olpherts.

KIRKE.

[*Taking snuff.*] Ah ! I suppose you're in with a lot of swells now, Brodrick.

SIR GEORGE.

No, no ; you don't understand me. The Duke is this young fellow's uncle by marriage. His Grace married a sister of Lady Cleeve's—of Cleeve's mother, you know.

KIRKE.

Oh ! This looks as if the family are trying to put a finger in the pie.

SIR GEORGE.

The Duke may be here by mere chance. Still, as you say, it does look—— [*Lowering his voice as KIRKE eyes an opening door.*] Who's that?

KIRKE.

The woman.

AGNES enters. *She moves firmly but noiselessly—a placid woman, with a sweet, low voice. Her dress is plain to the verge of coarseness; her face, which has little colour, is at the first glance almost wholly unattractive.*

AGNES.

[*Looking from one to the other.*] I thought you would send for me, perhaps. [*To SIR GEORGE.*] What do you say about him?

KIRKE.

One moment. [*Pointing to the balcony.*] Mrs. Thorpe——

AGNES.

Excuse me. [*She goes to the window and opens it.*

GERTRUDE.

Oh, Mrs. Cleeve! [*Entering the room.*] Am I in the way!

AGNES.

You are never that, dear. Run along to my room ; I'll call you in a minute or two. [GERTRUDE *nods, and goes to the door.*] Take off your hat and sit with me a little while.

GERTRUDE.

I'll stay for a bit, but this hat doesn't take off.

[*She goes out.*]

AGNES.

[*To SIR GEORGE and KIRKE.*] Yes ?

SIR GEORGE.

We are glad to be able to give a most favourable report. I may say that Mr. Cleeve has never appeared to be in better health.

AGNES.

[*Drawing a deep breath.*] He will be very much cheered by what you say.

SIR GEORGE.

[*Bowing stiffly.*] I'm glad——

AGNES.

His illness left him with a morbid, irrational

impression that he would never be quite his former self again.

SIR GEORGE.

A nervous man recovering from a scare. I've helped to remove that impression I believe.

AGNES.

Thank you. We have a troublesome, perhaps a hard time before us; we both need all our health and spirits. [*Turning her head, listening.*] Lucas?

LUCAS *enters the room.* *He is a handsome, intellectual-looking young man of about eight-and-twenty.*

LUCAS.

[*To AGNES, excitedly.*] Have you heard what they say of me?

AGNES.

[*Smiling.*] Yes.

LUCAS.

How good of you, Sir George, to break up your little holiday for the sake of an anxious, fidgety fellow. [*To AGNES.*] Isn't it?

AGNES.

Sir George has rendered us a great service.

LUCAS.

[*Going to KIRKE, brightly.*] Yes, and proved how ungrateful I've been to you, doctor.

KIRKE.

Don't apologise. People who don't know when they're well are the mainstay of my profession.

[*Offering snuff-box.*] Here——

[LUCAS *takes a pinch of snuff, laughingly.*]

AGNES.

[*In a low voice to SIR GEORGE.*] He has been terribly hipped at times. [*Taking up the vase of flowers from the table.*] Your visit will have made him another man.

[*She goes to a table, puts down the vase upon the tray, and commences to cut and arrange the fresh flowers she finds there.*]

LUCAS.

[*Seeing that AGNES is out of hearing.*] Excuse me, Kirke—just for one moment. [*To SIR GEORGE.*] Sir George —— [KIRKE *joins AGNES.*] You still go frequently to Great Cumberland Place?

SIR GEORGE.

Your mother's gout has been rather stubborn lately.

LUCAS.

Very likely she and my brother Sandford will get to hear of your visit to me here; in that case you'll be questioned pretty closely, naturally.

SIR GEORGE.

My position is certainly a little delicate.

LUCAS.

Oh, you may be perfectly open with my people as to my present mode of life. Only—— [*He motions SIR GEORGE to be seated; they sit facing each other.*] Only I want you to hear me declare again plainly [*looking towards AGNES*] that but for the care and devotion of that good woman over there, but for the solace of that woman's companionship, I should have been dead months ago—I should have died raving in my awful bedroom on the ground-floor of that foul Roman hotel. Malarial fever, of course! Doctors don't admit—do they?—that it's possible for strong men to die of miserable marriages. And yet I was dying in Rome, I truly believe, from *my* bitter,

crushing disappointment, from the consciousness of my wretched, irretrievable——

[FORTUNÉ enters, carrying LUCAS's hat, gloves, overcoat, and silk wrap, and, upon a salver, a bottle of medicine and a glass.

LUCAS.

[*Sharply.*] Qu'y a-t-il, Fortuné ?

FORTUNÉ.

Sir, you 'ave an appointment.

LUCAS.

[*Rising.*] At the Danieli at eleven. Is it so late ?

[FORTUNÉ places the things upon the table.

LUCAS puts the wrap round his throat ;
AGNES goes to him and arranges it for him solicitously.

SIR GEORGE.

[*Rising.*] I have to meet Lady Brodrick at the Piazzetta. Let me take you in my gondola.

LUCAS.

Thanks—delighted.

AGNES.

[*To* SIR GEORGE.] I would rather Lucas went in the house gondola: I know its cushions are dry. May he take you to the Piazzetta?

SIR GEORGE.

[*A little stiffly.*] Certainly.

AGNES.

[*To* FORTUNÉ.] Mettez les coussins dans la gondole.

FORTUNÉ.

Bien, madame.

[FORTUNÉ goes out. AGNES begins to measure a
dose of medicine.]

SIR GEORGE.

[*To* AGNES.] Er—I—ah——

LUCAS.

[*Putting on his gloves.*] Agnes, Sir George——

AGNES.

[*Turning to* SIR GEORGE, *the bottle and glass in her hands.*] Yes?

SIR GEORGE.

[*Constrainedly.*] We always make a point of acknowledging the importance of nursing as an aid to medical treatment. I—I am sure Mr. Cleeve owes you much in that respect.

AGNES.

Thank you.

SIR GEORGE.

[*To LUCAS.*] I have to discharge my gondola ; you'll find me at the steps, Cleeve. [AGNES *shifts the medicine bottle from one hand to the other so that her right hand may be free, but* SIR GEORGE *simply bows in a formal way and moves towards the door.*] You are coming with us, Kirke ?

KIRKE.

Yes.

SIR GEORGE.

Do you mind seeing that I'm not robbed by my gondolier ? [He goes out.]

AGNES.

[*Giving the medicine to LUCAS, undisturbed.*] Here, dear.

KIRKE.

[To AGNES.] May I pop in to-night for my game of chess ?

AGNES.

Do, doctor ; I shall be very pleased.

KIRKE.

[*Shaking her hand in a marked way*] Thank you.

[*He follows* SIR GEORGE.

AGNES.

[*Looking after him*] Liberal little man.

[*She has LUCAS'S overcoat in her hand ; a small pen-and-ink drawing of a woman's head drops from one of the pockets. They pick it up together.*

AGNES.

Isn't that the sketch you made of me in Florence ?

LUCAS.

[*Replacing it in the coat-pocket.*] Yes.

AGNES.

You are carrying it about with you ?

LUCAS.

I slipped it into my pocket, thinking it might interest the Duke.

AGNES.

[*Assisting him with his overcoat*] Surely I am too obnoxious in the abstract for your uncle to entertain such a detail as a portrait.

LUCAS.

It struck me it might serve to correct certain preconceived notions of my people's.

AGNES.

Images of a beautiful temptress with peach-blossom cheeks and stained hair ?

LUCAS.

That's what I mean ; I assume they suspect a decline of taste on my part, of that sort. Good-bye, dear.

AGNES.

Is this mission of the Duke of St. Olpherts the final attempt to part us, I wonder ? [*Angrily, her voice hardening.*] Why should they harass and disturb you as they do ?

LUCAS.

[*Kissing her.*] Nothing disturbs me now that I know I am strong and well. Besides, everybody will soon tire of being shocked. Even conventional morality must grow breathless in the chase.

[*He leaves her. She opens the other door and calls.*

AGNES.

Mrs. Thorpe! I'm alone now.

[*She goes on to the balcony, through the centre window, and looks down below. GERTRUDE enters, and joins her on the balcony.*

GERTRUDE.

How well your husband is looking!

AGNES.

Sir George Brodrick pronounces him quite recovered.

GERTRUDE.

Isn't that splendid! [*Waving her hand and calling.*]
Buon giorno, Signor Cleeve! Come molto meglio voi

state! [*Leaving the balcony, laughing.*] Ha, ha! my Italian!

[*AGNES waves finally to the gondola below, returns to the room, and slips her arm through GERTRUDE'S.*

AGNES.

Two whole days since I've seen you.

GERTRUDE

They've been two of my bad days, dear.

AGNES.

[*Looking into her face.*] All right now?

GERTRUDE.

Oh, "God's in His heaven" this morning! When the sun's out I feel that my little boy's bed in Ketherick Cemetery is warm and cosy.

AGNES.

[*Patting GERTRUDE'S hand.*] Ah!—

GERTRUDE.

The weather's the same all over Europe, according

to the papers. Do you think it's really going to settle at last? To me these chilly, showery nights are terrible. You know, I still tuck my child up at night-time; still have my last peep at him before going to my own bed; and it is awful to listen to these cold rains—drip, drip, drip upon that little green coverlet of his!

[She goes and stands by the window silently.]

AGNES.

This isn't strong of you, dear Mrs. Thorpe. You mustn't—you mustn't.

[AGNES brings the tray with the cut flowers to the nearer table; calmly and methodically she resumes trimming the stalks.]

GERTRUDE.

You're quite right. That's over. Now, then, I'm going to gabble for five minutes gaily. *[Settling herself comfortably in an armchair.]* What jolly flowers you've got there! What have you been doing with yourself? Amos took me to the Caffè Quadri yesterday to late breakfast, to cheer me up. Oh, I've something to say to you! At the Caffè, at the next table to ours, there were three English people—two men and a girl—home from India, I gathered. One

of the men was looking out of the window, quizzing the folks walking in the Piazza, and suddenly he caught sight of your husband. [AGNES's *hands pause in their work.*] "I do believe that's Lucas Cleeve," he said. And then the girl had a peep, and said: "Certainly it is." And the man said: "I must find out where he's stopping; if Minerva is with him, you must call." "Who's Minerva?" said the second man. "Minerva is Mrs. Lucas Cleeve," the girl said. "it's a pet name—he married a chum of mine, a daughter of Sir John Steyning's, a year or so after I went out." Excuse me, dear. Do these people really know you and your husband, or were they talking nonsense?

[AGNES *takes the vase of faded flowers, goes on to the balcony, and empties the contents of the vase into the canal. Then she stands by the window, her back towards*
GERTRUDE.

AGNES.

No, they evidently know Mr. Cleeve.

GERTRUDE.

Your husband never calls you by that pet-name

of yours. Why is it you haven't told me you're a daughter of Admiral Steyning's ?

AGNES.

Mrs. Thorpe——

GERTRUDE.

[*Warmly.*] Oh, I must say what I mean! I have often pulled myself up short in my gossips with you, conscious of a sort of wall between us. [AGNES *comes slowly from the window.*] Somehow, I feel now that you haven't in the least made a friend of me. I'm hurt. It's stupid of me; I can't help it.

AGNES.

[*After a moment's pause.*] I am not the lady these people were speaking of yesterday.

GERTRUDE.

Not—— ?

AGNES.

Mr. Cleeve is no longer with his wife; he has left her.

GERTRUDE.

Left—his wife !

AGNES.

Like yourself, I am a widow. I don't know whether you've ever heard my name—Ebbsmith. [GERTRUDE *stares at her blankly.*] I beg your pardon sincerely. I never meant to conceal my true position; such a course is opposed to every principle of mine. But I grew so attached to you in Florence and—well, it was contemptibly weak; I'll never do such a thing again.

[*She goes back to the table and commences to refill the vase with the fresh flowers.*]

GERTRUDE.

When you say that Mr. Cleeve has left his wife, I suppose you mean to tell me you have taken her place?

AGNES.

Yes, I mean that.

[GERTRUDE *rises and walks to the door.*]

GERTRUDE.

[*At the door.*] You knew that I could not speak to you again after hearing this?

AGNES.

I thought it almost certain you would not.

[*After a moment's irresolution, GERTRUDE returns, and stands by the settee.*]

GERTRUDE.

I can hardly believe you.

AGNES.

I should like you to hear more than just the bare fact.

GERTRUDE.

[*Drumming on the back of the settee.*] Why don't you tell me more?

AGNES.

You were going, you know.

GERTRUDE.

[*Sitting.*] I won't go quite like that. Please tell me.

AGNES.

[*Calmly.*] Well—did you ever read of John Thorold —“Jack Thorold, the demagogue?” [GERTRUDE *shakes her head.*] I daresay not. John Thorold, once

a schoolmaster, was my father. In my time he used to write for the two or three, so-called, inflammatory journals, and hold forth in small lecture-halls, occasionally even from the top of a wooden stool in the Park, upon trade and labour questions, division of wealth, and the rest of it. He believed in nothing that people who go to church are credited with believing in, Mrs. Thorpe ; his scheme for the re-adjustment of things was Force ; his pet doctrine, the ultimate healthy healing that follows the surgery of Revolution. But to me he was the gentlest creature imaginable ; and I was very fond of him, in spite of his—as I then thought—strange ideas. Strange ideas ! Ha ! many of 'em luckily don't sound quite so irrational to-day !

GERTRUDE.

[*Under her breath.*] Oh !

AGNES.

My home was a wretched one. If dad was violent out of the house, mother was violent enough in it ; with her it was rage, sulk, storm, from morning till night ; till one day father turned a deaf ear to mother and died in his bed. That was my first intimate experience of the horrible curse that falls upon so many.

GERTRUDE.

Curse ?

AGNES.

The curse of unhappy marriage. Though really I'd looked on at little else all my life. Most of our married friends were cursed in a like way ; and I remember taking an oath, when I was a mere child, that nothing should ever push me over into the choked-up, seething pit. Fool ! When I was nineteen I was gazing like a pet sheep into a man's eyes ; and one morning I was married, at St. Andrew's Church in Holborn, to Mr. Ebbsmith, a barrister.

GERTRUDE.

In church ?

AGNES.

Yes, in church—in church. In spite of father's unbelief and mother's indifference, at the time I married I was as simple—ay, in my heart as devout—as any girl in a parsonage. The other thing hadn't soaked into me. Whenever I could escape from our stifling rooms at home, and slam the front door behind me, the air blew away uncertainty and scepticism ; I seemed only to have to take a long, deep breath to be full of hope and faith. And it was like this till that man married me.

GERTRUDE.

Of course, I guess your marriage was an unfortunate one.

AGNES.

It lasted eight years. For about twelve months he treated me like a woman in a harem, for the rest of the time like a beast of burden. Oh! when I think of it! [*Wiping her brow with her handkerchief.*] Phew!

GERTRUDE.

It changed you?

AGNES.

Oh, yes, it changed me.

GERTRUDE.

You spoke of yourself just now as a widow. He's dead?

AGNES.

He died on our wedding-day—the eighth anniversary.

GERTRUDE.

You were free then—free to begin again.

AGNES.

Eh? [*Looking at GERTRUDE.*] Yes; but you don't

begin to believe all over again. [*She gathers up the stalks of the flowers from the tray, and, kneeling, crams them into the stove.*] However, this is an old story. I'm thirty-three now.

GERTRUDE.

[*Hesitatingly.*] You and Mr. Cleeve——?

AGNES.

We've known each other since last November—no longer. Six years of my life unaccounted for, eh? Well, for a couple of years or so I was lecturing.

GERTRUDE.

Lecturing?

AGNES.

Ah, I'd become an out-and-out child of my father by that time—spouting, perhaps you'd call it, standing on the identical little platforms he used to speak from, lashing abuses with my tongue as he had done. Oh, and I was fond, too, of warning women.

GERTRUDE.

Against what?

AGNES.

Falling into the pit,

GERTRUDE.

Marriage?

AGNES.

The choked-up, seething pit—until I found my bones almost through my skin and my voice too weak to travel across a room.

GERTRUDE.

From what cause?

AGNES.

Starvation, my dear. So, after lying in a hospital for a month or two, I took up nursing for a living. Last November I was sent for by Dr. Bickerstaff to go through to Rome to look after a young man who'd broken down there, and who declined to send for his friends. My patient was Mr. Cleeve—[*taking up the tray*]*—and that's where his fortunes join mine.*

[She crosses the room, and puts the tray upon the cabinet.]

GERTRUDE.

And yet, judging from what that girl said yesterday, Mr. Cleeve married quite recently?

AGNES.

Less than three years ago. Men don't suffer as

patiently as women. In many respects his marriage story is my own, reversed—the man in place of the woman. I endured my hell, though; he broke the gates of his.

GERTRUDE.

I have often seen Mr. Cleeve's name in the papers. His future promised to be brilliant, didn't it?

AGNES.

[*Tidying the table, folding the newspapers, &c.*]
There's a great career for him still.

GERTRUDE.

In Parliament—*now?*

AGNES.

No, he abandons that, and devotes himself to writing. We shall write much together, urging our views on this subject of Marriage. We shall have to be poor, I expect, but we shall be content.

GERTRUDE.

Content!

AGNES.

Quite content. Don't judge us by my one piece of

cowardly folly in keeping the truth from you, Mrs. Thorpe. Indeed, it's our great plan to live the life we have mapped out for ourselves, fearlessly, openly ; faithful to each other, helpful to each other, for as long as we remain together.

GERTRUDE.

But tell me—you don't know how I—how I have liked you !—tell me, if Mr. Cleeve's wife divorces him he will marry you ?

AGNES.

No.

GERTRUDE.

No !

AGNES.

No. I haven't made you quite understand—Lucas and I don't desire to marry, in your sense.

GERTRUDE.

But you are devoted to each other !

AGNES.

Thoroughly.

GERTRUDE.

What, is that the meaning of “for as long as you

are together?" You would go your different ways if ever you found that one of you was making the other unhappy?

AGNES.

I do mean that. We remain together only to help, to heal, to console. Why should men and women be so eager to grant to each other the power of wasting life? That is what marriage gives—the right to destroy years and years of life. And the right, once given, it *attracts—attracts!* We have both suffered from it. So many rich years out of my life have been squandered by it. And out of his life, so much force, energy—spent in battling with the shrew, the termagant he has now fled from; strength never to be replenished, never to be repaid—all wasted, wasted!

GERTRUDE.

Your legal marriage with him might not bring further miseries.

AGNES.

Too late! We have done with marriage; we distrust it. We are not now among those who regard marriage as indispensable to union. We have done with it!

GERTRUDE.

[*Advancing to her.*] You know it would be impossible for me, if I would do so, to deceive my brother as to all this.

AGNES.

Why, of course, dear

GERTRUDE

[*Looking at her watch.*] Amos must be wondering——

AGNES.

Run away, then.

[GERTRUDE crosses quickly towards the door.]

GERTRUDE.

[*Retracing a step or two.*] Shall I see you——?
Oh!

AGNES.

[*Shaking her head.*] Ah!

GERTRUDE.

[*Going to her, constrainedly.*] When Amos and I have talked this over, perhaps—perhaps——

AGNES.

No, no, I fear not. Come, my dear friend—[*with a smile*—give me a shake of the hand.

GERTRUDE.

[*Taking her hand*] What you've told me is dreadful. [*Looking into AGNES's face.*] And yet you're not a wicked woman ! [*Kissing AGNES.*] In case we don't meet again.

[*The women separate quickly, looking towards the door, as LUCAS enters.*

LUCAS.

[*Shaking hands with GERTRUDE.*] How do you do, Mrs. Thorpe? I've just had a wave of the hand from your brother.

GERTRUDE.

Where is he ?

LUCAS.

On his back in a gondola, a pipe in his mouth as usual, gazing skywards. [*Going on to the balcony.*] He's within hail. [*GERTRUDE goes quickly to the door, followed by AGNES.*] There ! by the Palazzo Sforza. [*He re-enters the room ; GERTRUDE has disappeared.*

He is going towards the door.] Let me get hold of him, Mrs. Thorpe.

AGNES.

[Standing before LUCAS, quietly.] She knows, Lucas, dear.

LUCAS.

Does she ?

AGNES.

She overheard some gossip at the Caffè Quadri yesterday, and began questioning me ; so I told her.

LUCAS.

[Taking off his coat.] Adieu to them, then—eh ?

AGNES.

[Assisting him.] Adieu.

LUCAS.

I intended to write to the brother directly they had left Venice, to explain.

AGNES.

Your describing me as “ Mrs. Cleeve ” at the hotel in Florence helped to lead us into this ; after we

move from here I must always be, frankly, "Mrs. Ebbsmith."

LUCAS.

These were decent people. You and she had formed quite an attachment?

AGNES.

Yes.

[She places his coat, &c., on a chair, then fetches her work-basket from the cabinet.]

LUCAS.

There's something of the man in your nature, Agnes.

AGNES.

I've anathematised my womanhood often enough.

[She sits at the table, taking out her work composedly.]

LUCAS.

Not that every man possesses the power you have acquired—the power of going through life with compressed lips.

AGNES.

[Looking up, smiling.] A propos?

LUCAS.

These people—this woman you've been so fond of. You see them shrink away with the utmost composure.

AGNES.

[*Threading a needle.*] You forget, dear, that you and I have prepared ourselves for a good deal of this sort of thing.

LUCAS.

Certainly, but at the moment——

AGNES.

One must take care that the regret lasts no longer than a moment. Have you seen your uncle?

LUCAS.

A glimpse. He hadn't long risen.

AGNES.

He adds sluggishness to other vices, then?

LUCAS.

[*Lighting a cigarette.*] He greeted me through six inches of open door. His toilet has its mysteries

AGNES.

A stormy interview ?

LUCAS.

The reverse. He grasped my hand warmly, declared I looked the picture of health, and said it was evident I had been most admirably nursed.

AGNES.

[*Frowning*] That's a strange utterance. But he's an eccentric, isn't he ?

LUCAS.

No man has ever been quite satisfied as to whether his oddities are ingrained or affected.

AGNES.

No man. What about women ?

LUCAS.

Ho ! they have had opportunities of closer observation.

AGNES.

Hah ! And they report—— ?

LUCAS.

Nothing. They become curiously reticent.

AGNES.

[*Scornfully, as she is cutting a thread.*] These noblemen !

LUCAS.

[*Taking a packet of letters from his pocket.*] Finally, he presented me with these, expressed a hope that he'd see much of me during the week, and dismissed me with a fervent God bless you !

AGNES.

[*Surprised.*] He remains here, then ?

LUCAS.

It seems so.

AGNES.

What are those, dear ?

LUCAS.

The Duke has made himself the bearer of some letters, from friends. I've only glanced at them : reproaches—appeals——

AGNES.

Yes, I understand.

[*He sits looking through the letters impatiently, then tearing them up and throwing the pieces upon the table.*

LUCAS.

Lord Warminster—my godfather : “ My dear boy, for God’s sake —— ! ” [*Tearing up the letter and reading another.*] Sir Charles Littlecote : “ Your brilliant future blasted ” [*Another letter.*] Lord From : “ Promise of a useful political career unfulfilled cannot an old friend ? ” [*Another letter.*] Edith Heytesbury. I didn’t notice a woman had honoured me. [*In an undertone.*] Edie—— ! [*Slipping the letter into his pocket and opening another.*] Jack Brophy : “ Your great career—— ” Major Leete : “ Your career—— ” [*Destroying the rest of the letters without reading them.*] My career ! my career ! That’s the chorus, evidently. Well, there goes my career ! [*She lays her work aside and goes to him.*]

AGNES.

Your career ? [*Pointing to the destroyed letters.*] True, that one is over. But there’s the other, you know—*ours*.

LUCAS.

[*Touching her hand.*] Yes, yes. Still, its just a little saddening, the saying good-bye—[*disturbing the scraps of paper*]—to all this.

AGNES.

Saddening, dear? Why, this political career of yours—think what it would have been at best? Accident of birth sent you to the wrong side of the House; influence of family would always have kept you there.

LUCAS.

[*Partly to himself.*] But I made my mark. I did make my mark.

AGNES.

Supporting the Party that retards; the Party that preserves for the rich, palters with the poor. [*Pointing to the letters again.*] Oh, there's not much to mourn for there!

LUCAS.

Still, it was—success.

AGNES.

Success!

LUCAS.

I was talked about, written about, as a Coming Man—*the* Coming Man!

AGNES.

How many “coming men” has one known
Where on earth do they all go to?

LUCAS.

Ah, yes, but I allowed for the failures, and carefully set myself to discover the causes of them. And, as I put my finger upon the causes and examined them, I congratulated myself and said, "Well, I haven't *that* weak point in my armour, or *that* ;" and, Agnes, at last I was fool enough to imagine I had no weak point, none whatever.

AGNES.

It was weak enough to believe that.

LUCAS.

I couldn't foresee that I was doomed to pay the price all nervous men pay for success ; that the greater my success became, the more cancer-like grew the fear of never being able to continue it, to excel it ; that the triumph of to-day was always to be the torture of to-morrow ! Oh, Agnes, the agony of success to a nervous, sensitive man ; the dismal apprehension that fills his life and gives each victory a voice to cry out "Hear, hear ! Bravo, bravo, bravo ! But this is to be your last—you'll never overtop it !" Ha, yes ! I soon found out the weak spot in my armour—the need of constant encouragement, con-

stant reminder of my powers ; [*taking her hand*] the need of that subtle sympathy which a sacrificing, unselfish woman alone possesses the secret of. [*Rising.*] Well, my very weakness might have been a source of greatness if, three years ago, it had been to such a woman that I had bound myself—a woman of your disposition ; instead of to—— ! Ah !

[*She lays her hand upon his arm soothingly.*]

LUCAS.

Yes, yes. [*Taking her in his arms.*] I know I have such a companion now.

AGNES.

Yes—now——

LUCAS.

You must be everything to me, Agnes—a double faculty, as it were. When my confidence in myself is shaken, you must try to keep the consciousness of my poor powers alive in me.

AGNES.

I shall not fail you in that, Lucas.

LUCAS.

And yet, whenever disturbing recollections come

uppermost ; when I catch myself mourning for those lost opportunities of mine ; it is your love that must grant me oblivion — [*kissing her upon the lips*] — your love !

[She makes no response, and after a pause gently releases herself and retreats a step or two.]

LUCAS.

[His eyes following her.] Agnes, you seem to be changing towards me, growing colder to me. At times you seem positively to shrink from me. I don't understand it. Yesterday I thought I saw you look at me as if I—frightened you !

AGNES.

Lucas—Lucas dear, for some weeks, now, I've wanted to say this to you.

LUCAS.

What ?

AGNES.

Don't you think that such a union as ours would be much braver, much more truly courageous, if it could but be—be——

LUCAS.

If it could but be—what ?

AGNES.

[*Averting her eyes.*] Devoid of passion, if passion had no share in it.

LUCAS.

Surely this comes a little late, Agnes, between you and me.

AGNES.

[*Leaning upon the back of a chair, staring before her and speaking in a low, steady voice.*] What has been was inevitable, I suppose. Still, we have hardly yet set foot upon the path we've agreed to follow. It is not too late for us, in our own lives, to put the highest interpretation upon that word—Love. Think of the inner sustaining power it would give us! [*More forcibly.*] We agree to go through the world together, preaching the lessons taught us by our experiences. We cry out to all people, "Look at us! Man and woman who are in the bondage of neither law nor ritual! Linked simply by mutual trust! Man and wife, but something better than man and wife! Friends, but even something better than friends!" I say there is that which is noble, finely defiant, in

the future we have mapped out for ourselves, if only
—if only—

LUCAS.

Yes ?

AGNES.

[*Turning from him.*] If only it could be free from
passion !

LUCAS.

[*In a low voice.*] Yes, but—is that possible ?

AGNES.

[*In the same tone, watching him askance, a frightened look in her eyes.*] Why not ?

LUCAS.

Young man and woman . . . youth and love
. . . ? Scarcely upon this earth, my dear Agnes,
such a life as you have pictured.

AGNES.

I say it can be, it can be—— !

[FORTUNÉ enters, carrying a letter upon a
silver, and a beautiful bouquet of white
flowers. He hands the note to LUCAS.]

LUCAS.

[*Taking the note, glancing at AGNES.*] Eh! [*To FORTUNÉ, pointing to the bouquet.*] Qu'avez-vous là ?

FORTUNÉ.

Ah, excuse. [*Presenting the bouquet to AGNES.*] Wiz compliment. [*AGNES takes the bouquet wonderingly.*] Tell Madame ze Duke of St. Olphert bring it in person, 'e says.

LUCAS.

[*Opening the note.*] Est-il parti ?

FORTUNÉ.

'E did not get out of 'is gondola.

LUCAS.

Bien. [*FORTUNÉ withdraws. Reading the note aloud.*] "While brushing my hair, my dear boy, I became possessed of a strong desire to meet the lady with whom you are now improving the shining hour. Why the devil shouldn't I, if I want to? Without prejudice, as my lawyer says, let me turn up this afternoon and chat pleasantly to her of Shakespeare, also the musical glasses. Pray hand her this flag of truce—I mean my poor bunch of flowers—and believe

me yours, with a touch of gout, ST. OLPHERTS.”
[*Indignantly crushing the note.*] Ah !

AGNES.

[*Frowning at the flowers.*] A taste of the oddities, I suppose !

LUCAS.

He is simply making sport of us. [*Going on to the balcony, and looking out.*] There he^e is. Damn that smile of his !

AGNES.

Where ?

[*She joins him.*]

LUCAS.

With the two gondoliers.

AGNES.

Why—that’s a beautiful face ! How strange !

LUCAS.

[*Drawing her back into the room.*] Come away. He is looking up at us.

AGNES.

Are you sure he sees us ?

LUCAS.

He did.

AGNES.

He will want an answer——

[She deliberately flings the bouquet over the balcony into the canal, then returns to the table and picks up her work.]

LUCAS.

[Looking out again cautiously.] He throws his head back and laughs heartily. *[Re-entering the room.]* Oh, of course, his policy is to attempt to laugh me out of my resolves. They send him here merely to laugh at me, Agnes, to laugh at me—*[coming to AGNES angrily.]* laugh at me!

AGNES.

He must be a man of small resources. *[Threading her needle.]* It is so easy to mock.

END OF THE FIRST ACT.

THE SECOND ACT

The Scene is the same as that of the previous Act. Through the windows some mastheads and flapping sails are seen in the distance. The light is that of late afternoon.

AGNES, *very plainly dressed, is sitting at the table, industriously copying from a manuscript. After a moment or two, ANTONIO and NELLA enter the room, carrying a dressmaker's box, which is corded and labelled.*

NELLA.

È permesso, Signora. (Permit us, Signora.)

ANTONIO.

Uno scatolone per la Signora. (An enormous box for the Signora.)

AGNES.

[*Turning her head.*] Eh?

NELLA.

È venuto colla ferrovia—— (It has come by the railway——)

ANTONIO.

[*Consulting the label.*] Da Firenze. (From Florence.)

AGNES.

By railway, from Florence ?

NELLA.

[*Reading from the label.*] “ Emilia Bardini, Via Rondinelli.”

AGNES.

Bardini ? That’s the dressmaker. There must be some mistake. Non è per me, Nella. (It isn’t for me.)

[ANTONIO and NELLA carry the box to her animatedly.]

NELLA.

Ma guardi, Signora ! (But look, Signora !)

ANTONIO.

Alla Signora Cleeve !

NELLA.

E poi abbiamo pagato il porto della ferrovia. (Besides, we have paid the railway dues upon it.)

AGNES.

[*Collecting her sheets of paper.*] Hush, hush ! don't trouble me just now. Mettez-la n'importe ou.

[*They place the box on another table.*

NELLA.

La corda intaccherebbe la forbice della Signora. Vuole che Antonio la tagli. (The cord would blunt the Signora's scissors. Shall Antonio cut the cord ?)

AGNES.

[*Pinning her sheets of paper together.*] I'll see about it by-and-bye. Laissez-moi !

NELLA.

[*Softly to ANTONIO,*] Taglia, taglia ! (Cut, cut !)

[*ANTONIO cuts the cord, whereupon NELLA utters a little scream.*

AGNES.

[*Turning, startled.*] What is it !

NELLA.

[*Pushing ANTONIO away.*] Questo stupido non ha

capito la Signora e ha tagliata la corda. (The stupid fellow misunderstood the Signora, and has severed the cord.)

AGNES.

[*Rising.*] It doesn't matter. Be quiet !

NELLA.

[*Removing the lid from the box angrily.*] Ed ecco la scatola aperta contro voglia della Signora ! (And now here is the box open against the Signora's wish !) [*Inquisitively pushing aside the paper which covers the contents of the box.*] O Dio ! Si vede tutto quel che vi é ! (O God ! and all the contents exposed !)

[*When the paper is removed, some beautiful material trimmed with lace, &c., is seen.*]

NELLA.

Guardi, guardi, Signora ! (Signora, look, look !)
[AGNES examines the contents of the box with a puzzled air.] Oh, che bellezza ! (How beautiful !)

LUCAS enters.

ANTONIO.

[*To NELLA.*] Il padrone. (The master.)

[*NELLA courtesies to LUCAS, then withdraws with ANTONIO.*

AGNES.

Lucas, the dressmaker in the Via Rondinelli at Florence—the woman who ran up the little gown I have on now——

LUCAS.

[*With a smile.*] What of her?

AGNES.

This has just come from her. Phuh! What does she mean by sending the showy thing to me?

LUCAS.

It is my gift to you.

AGNES.

[*Producing enough of the contents of the box to reveal a very handsome dress.*] This!

LUCAS.

I knew Bardini had your measurements; I wrote

to her, instructing her to make that. I remember Lady Heytesbury in something similar last season.

AGNES.

[*Examining the dress.*] A mere strap for the sleeve, and sufficiently *décolletée*, I should imagine.

LUCAS.

My dear Agnes, I can't understand your reason for trying to make yourself a plain-looking woman when nature intended you for a pretty one.

AGNES.

Pretty !

LUCAS.

[*Looking hard at her.*] You *are* pretty.

AGNES.

Oh, as a girl I may have been—[*disdainfully*]—pretty. What good did it do anybody ? [*Fingering the dress with aversion.*] And when would you have me hang this on my bones ?

LUCAS.

Oh, when we are dining, or——

AGNES.

Dining in a public place?

LUCAS.

Why not look your best in a public place?

AGNES.

Look my best! You know, I don't think of this sort of garment in connection with our companionship, Lucas.

LUCAS.

It is not an extraordinary garment for a lady.

AGNES.

Rustle of silk, glare of arms and throat—they belong, in my mind, to such a very different order of things from that we have set up.

LUCAS.

Shall I appear before you in ill-made clothes, clumsy boots——

AGNES.

Why? We are just as we always have been, since we've been together. I don't tell you that your appearance is beginning to offend.

LUCAS.

Offend ! Agnes, you—you pain me. I simply fail to understand why you should allow our mode of life to condemn you to perpetual slovenliness.

AGNES.

Slovenliness !

LUCAS.

No, no, shabbiness.

AGNES.

[*Looking down upon the dress she is wearing.*]
Shabbiness !

LUCAS.

[*With a laugh.*] Forgive me, dear ; I'm forgetting you are wearing a comparatively new afternoon-gown.

AGNES.

At any rate, I'll make this brighter to-morrow with some trimmings, willingly. [*Pointing to the dress-maker's box.*] Then you won't insist on my decking myself out in rags of that kind—eh ! There's something in the idea—I needn't explain.

LUCAS.

[*Fretfully.*] Insist ! I'll not urge you again.

[*Pointing to the box.*] Get rid of it somehow. Are you copying that manuscript of mine ?

AGNES.

I had just finished it.

LUCAS.

Already ! [*Taking up her copy.*] How beautifully you write ! [*Going to her eagerly.*] What do you think of my Essay ?

AGNES.

It bristles with truth ; it is vital.

LUCAS.

My method of treating it ?

AGNES.

Hardly a word out of place.

LUCAS.

[*Chilled.*] *Hardly* a word ?

AGNES.

Not a word, in fact.

LUCAS.

No, dear, I daresay your "hardly" is nearer the mark.

AGNES.

I assure you it is brilliant, Lucas.

LUCAS.

What a wretch I am ever to find the smallest fault in you ! Shall we dine out to-night ?

AGNES.

As you wish, dear.

LUCAS.

At the Grünwald ? [*He goes to the table to pick up his manuscript ; when his back is turned she looks at her watch quickly.*] We'll solemnly toast this, shall we, in Montefiascone ?

AGNES.

[*Eyeing him askance.*] You are going out for your chocolate this afternoon as usual, I suppose ?

LUCAS.

Yes, but I'll look through your copy first, so that

I can slip it into the post at once. You are not coming out ?

AGNES.

Not till dinner-time.

LUCAS.

[*Kissing her on the forehead.*] I talked over the points of this—[*tapping the manuscript*—with a man this morning ; he praised some of the phrases warmly.

AGNES.

A man ? [*In an altered tone.*] The Duke ?

LUCAS.

Er—yes.

AGNES.

[*With assumed indifference, replacing the lid on the dressmaker's box.*] You have seen him again to-day, then ?

LUCAS.

We strolled about together for half an hour on the Piazza.

AGNES.

[*Replacing the cord round the box.*] You—you don't dislike him as much as you did ?

LUCAS.

He's somebody to chat to. I suppose one gets accustomed even to a man one dislikes.

AGNES.

[*Almost inaudibly.*] I suppose so.

LUCAS.

As a matter of fact, he has the reputation of being rather a pleasant companion ; though I—I confess—I—I don't find him very entertaining.

[*He goes out. She stands staring at the door through which he has disappeared. There is a knock at the opposite door.*]

AGNES.

[*Rousing herself.*] Fortuné ! [*Raising her voice.*]
Fortuné !

[*The door opens, and GERTRUDE enters hurriedly.*]

GERTRUDE.

Fortuné is complacently smoking a cigarette in the Campo.

AGNES.

Mrs. Thorpe !

GERTRUDE.

[*Breathlessly.*] Mr. Cleeve is out, I conclude ?

AGNES.

No. He is later than usual in going out this afternoon.

GERTRUDE.

[*Irresolutely.*] I don't think I'll wait, then.

AGNES.

But do tell me : you have been crossing the streets to avoid me during the past week ; what has made you come to see me now

GERTRUDE.

I *would* come. I've given poor Amos the slip ; he believes I'm buying beads for the Ketherick school-children.

AGNES.

[*Shaking her head.*] Ah, Mrs. Thorpe !——

GERTRUDE.

Of course, it's perfectly brutal to be underhanded.

But we're leaving for home to-morrow; I couldn't resist it.

AGNES.

[*Coldly.*] Perhaps I'm very ungracious——

GERTRUDE.

[*Taking AGNES's hand.*] The fact is, Mrs. Cleave—oh, what do you wish me to call you?

AGNES.

[*Withdrawing her hand.*] Well—you're off to-morrow. Agnes will do.

GERTRUDE.

Thank you. The fact is, it's been a bad week with me—restless, fanciful. And I haven't been able to get you out of my head.

AGNES.

I'm sorry.

GERTRUDE.

Your story, your present life; you, yourself—such a contradiction to what you profess! Well, it all has a sort of fascination for me.

AGNES.

My dear, you're simply not sleeping again. [*Turn-*

ing away.] You'd better go back to the ammonia Kirke prescribed for you.

GERTRUDE.

[*Taking a card from her purse, with a little, light laugh.*] You want to physic me, do you, after worrying my poor brain as you've done? [*Going to her.*] "The Rectory, Daleham, Ketherick Moor." Yorkshire, you know. There can be no great harm in your writing o me sometimes.

AGNES.

[*Refusing the card*] No; under the circumstances I can't promise that.

GERTRUDE.

[*Wistfully.*] Very well.

AGNES.

[*Facing her.*] Oh, can't you understand that it can only be—disturbing to both of us for an impulsive, emotional creature like yourself to keep up acquaintanceship with a woman who takes life as I do? We'll drop each other, leave each other alone.

[*She walks away, and stands leaning upon the stove, her back towards GERTRUDE.*]

GERTRUDE.

[*Replacing the card in her purse.*] As you please. Picture me, sometimes, in that big, hollow shell of a rectory at Ketherick, strolling about my poor dead little chap's empty room.

AGNES.

[*Under her breath.*] Oh !

GERTRUDE.

[*Turning to go.*] God bless you.

AGNES.

Gertrude ! [*With altered manner.*] You—you have the trick of making me lonely also. [*Going to GERTRUDE, taking her hands and fondling them.*] I'm tired of talking to the walls ! And your blood is warm to me ! Shall I tell you, or not—or not ?

GERTRUDE.

Do tell me.

AGNES.

There is a man here, in Venice, who is torturing me—flaying me alive.

GERTRUDE.

Torturing you ?

AGNES.

He came here about a week ago ; he is trying to separate us.

GERTRUDE.

You and Mr. Cleve ?

AGNES.

Yes.

GERTRUDE.

You are afraid he will succeed ?

AGNES.

Succeed ! What nonsense you talk !

GERTRUDE.

What upsets you, then ?

AGNES.

After all, it's difficult to explain—the feeling is so indefinite. It's like—something in the air. This man is influencing us both oddly. Lucas is as near illness again as possible ; I can *hear* his nerves vibrat-

ing. And I—you know what a fish-like thing I am as a rule—just look at me now, as I'm speaking to you.

GERTRUDE.

But don't you and Mr. Cleeve—talk to each other ?

AGNES.

As children do when the lights are put out—of everything but what's uppermost in their minds.

GERTRUDE.

You have met the man ?

AGNES.

I intend to meet him.

GERTRUDE.

Who is he

AGNES.

A relation of Lucas's—the Duke of St. Olpherts.

GERTRUDE.

He has right on his side, then ?

AGNES.

If you choose to think so.

GERTRUDE.

[*Deliberately.*] Supposing he *does* succeed in taking Mr. Cleeve away from you?

AGNES.

[*Staring at GERTRUDE.*] What, *now*, do you mean?

GERTRUDE.

Yes.

[*There is a brief pause; then AGNES walks across the room, wiping her brow with her handkerchief.*

AGNES.

I tell you, that idea's—preposterous.

GERTRUDE.

Oh, I can't understand you

AGNES.

You'll respect my confidence?

GERTRUDE.

Agnes!

AGNES.

[*Sitting.*] Well, I fancy this man's presence here

has simply started me thinking of a time—oh, it may never come!—a time when I may cease to be—necessary to Mr. Cleeve. Do you understand?

GERTRUDE.

I remember what you told me of your being prepared to grant each other freedom if——

AGNES.

Yes, yes; and for the past few days this idea has filled me with a fear of the most humiliating kind.

GERTRUDE.

What fear?

AGNES.

The fear lest, after all my beliefs and protestations, I should eventually find myself loving Lucas in the helpless, common way of women——

GERTRUDE.

[*Under her breath.*] I see.

AGNES.

The dread that the moment may arrive some day

when, should it be required of me, *I shan't feel myself able to give him up easily.* [*Her head drooping, uttering a low moan.*] Oh!—

LUCAS, *dressed for going out, enters, carrying AGNES'S copy of his manuscript, rolled and addressed for the post.* AGNES *rises.*

AGNES.

[*To* LUCAS.] Mrs. Thorpe starts for home to-morrow; she has called to say good-bye.

LUCAS.

[*To* GERTRUDE.] It is very kind. Is your brother quite well?

GERTRUDE.

[*Embarrassed.*] Thanks: quite.

LUCAS.

[*Smiling.*] I believe I have added to his experience of the obscure corners of Venice during the past week

GERTRUDE.

I—I don't—— Why?

LUCAS.

By so frequently putting him to the inconvenience of avoiding me.

GERTRUDE.

Oh, Mr. Cleeve, we—I—I——

LUCAS.

Please tell your brother I asked after him.

GERTRUDE.

I—I can't; he—doesn't know I've—I've——

LUCAS.

Ah! really? [*With a bow.*] Good-bye.

[*He goes out, AGNES accompanying him to the door.*]

GERTRUDE.

[*To herself.*] Brute! [*To AGNES.*] Oh, I suppose Mr. Cleeve has made me look precisely as I feel.

AGNES.

How?

GERTRUDE.

Like people deserve to feel who do godly, mean things. [FORTUNÉ appears.]

FORTUNÉ.

[*To AGNES, significantly.*] Mr. Cleeve 'as jus' gone out.

AGNES.

Vous savez, n'est-ce pas ?

FORTUNÉ.

[*Glancing at GERTRUDE.*] But Madame is now engage.

GERTRUDE.

[*To AGNES.*] Oh, I am going.

AGNES.

[*To GERTRUDE.*] Wait. [*Softly to her.*] I want you to hear this little comedy. Fortuné shall repeat my instructions. [*To FORTUNÉ.*] Les ordres que je vous ai donnés, répétez-les.

FORTUNÉ.

[*Speaking in an undertone.*] On ze left 'and side of ze Campo——

AGNES.

Non, non—tout haut.

FORTUNÉ.

[*Aloud, with a slight shrug of the shoulders.*] On ze left 'and side of ze Campo——

AGNES.

Yes.

FORTUNÉ.

In one of ze doorways between Fiorentini's and ze lectle lamp-shop—ze—ze—h'm—ze person.

AGNES.

Precisely. Dépêchez-vous. [FORTUNÉ *bows and retires.*] Fortuné flatters himself he is engaged in some horrid intrigue. You guess whom I am expecting?

GERTRUDE.

The Duke?

AGNES.

[*Ringling a bell.*] I've written to him asking him to call upon me this afternoon while Lucas is at Florian's. [*Referring to her watch.*] He is to kick his heels about the Campo till I let him know I am alone.

GERTRUDE.

Will he obey you?

AGNES.

A week ago he was curious to see the sort of animal I am. If he holds off now, I'll hit upon some other plan. I will come to close quarters with him, if only for five minutes.

GERTRUDE.

Good-bye. [*They embrace, then walk together to the door.*] You still refuse my address?

AGNES.

You bat! Didn't you see me make a note of it?

GERTRUDE.

You!

AGNES.

[*Her hand on her heart.*] Here.

GERTRUDE.

[*Gratefully.*] Ah!

[*She goes out.*]

AGNES.

[*At the open door.*] Gertrude!

GERTRUDE.

[*Outside.*] Yes?

AGNES.

[*In a low voice.*] Remember, in my thoughts I pace that lonely little room of yours with you. [*As if to stop GERTRUDE from re-entering.*] Hush! No, no.

[*She closes the door sharply.* NELLA appears.

AGNES.

[*Pointing to the box on the table.*] Portez ce carton dans ma chambre.

NELLA.

[*Trying to peep into the box as she carries it.*] Signora, se Ella si mettesse questo magnifico abito! Oh! quanto sarebbe più bella! (Signora, if you were to wear this magnificent dress, oh how much more beautiful you would be!)

AGNES.

[*Listening.*] Sssh! Sssh! [NELLA goes out. FORTUNÉ enters.] Eh, bien?

FORTUNÉ glances over his shoulder. The DUKE OF ST. OLPHERTS enters; the wreck of a very handsome man, with delicate features, a transparent complexion, a polished manner, and a smooth, weary voice. He limps, walking with the aid of a cane. FORTUNÉ retires.

AGNES.

Duke of St. Olpherts ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Bowing.*] Mrs. Ebbsmith ?

AGNES.

Mr. Cleeve would have opposed this rather out-of-the-way proceeding of mine. He doesn't know I have asked you to call on me to-day.

ST. OLPHERTS.

So I conclude. It gives our meeting a pleasant air of adventure.

AGNES.

I shall tell him directly he returns.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Gallantly.*] And destroy a cherished secret.

AGNES.

You are an invalid. [*Motioning him to be seated.*] Pray don't stand. [*Sitting.*] Your Grace is a man who takes life lightly. It will relieve you to hear

that I wish to keep sentiment out of any business we have together.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I believe I haven't the reputation of being a sentimental man. [*Seating himself.*] You send for me, Mrs. Ebbsmith——

AGNES.

To tell you I have come to regard the suggestion you were good enough to make a week ago——

ST. OLPHERTS.

Suggestion?

AGNES.

Shakespeare, the musical glasses, you know——

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh, yes. Ha! ha!

AGNES.

I've come to think it a reasonable one. At the moment I considered it a gross impertinence.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Written requests are so dependent on a sympathetic reader.

AGNES.

That meeting might have saved you time and trouble.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I grudge neither.

AGNES.

It might perhaps have shown your Grace that your view of life is too narrow ; that your method of dealing with its problems wants variety ; that, in point of fact, your employment upon your present mission is distinctly inappropriate. Our meeting to-day may serve the same purpose.

ST. OLPHERTS.

My view of life ?

AGNES.

That all men and women may safely be judged by the standards of the casino and the dancing-garden.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I have found those standards not altogether untrustworthy. My method—— ?

AGNES.

To scoff, to sneer, to ridicule.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Ah! And how much is there, my dear Mrs. Ebb-smith, belonging to humanity that survives being laughed at?

AGNES.

More than you credit, Duke. For example, I—I think it possible you may not succeed in grinning away the compact between Mr. Cleeve and myself.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Compact?

AGNES.

Between serious man and woman.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Serious *woman*.

AGNES.

Ah! at least you must see that—serious woman. [*Rising, facing him.*] You can't fail to realise, even from this slight personal knowledge of me, that you are not dealing just now with some poor, feeble ballet-girl.

ST. OLPHERTS.

But how well you put it! [*Rising.*] And how

frank of you to furnish, as it were, a plan of the fortifications to the—the——

AGNES.

Why do you stick at “enemy”?

ST. OLPHERTS.

It's not the word. Opponent! For the moment, perhaps, opponent. I am never an enemy, I hope, where your sex is concerned.

AGNES.

No, I am aware that you are not over-nice in the bestowal of your patronage—where my sex is concerned.

ST. OLPHERTS.

You regard my appearance in an affair of morals as a quaint one?

AGNES.

Your Grace is beginning to know me.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Dear lady, you take pride, I hear, in belonging to—The People. You would delight me amazingly by giving me an inkling of the popular notion of my career.

AGNES.

[*Walking away.*] Excuse me.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Following her.*] Please! It would be instructive, perhaps chastening. I entreat.

AGNES.

No.

ST. OLPHERTS.

You are letting sentiment intrude itself. [*Sitting, in pain.*] I challenge you.

AGNES.

At Eton you were curiously precocious. The head-master, referring to your aptitude with books, prophesied a brilliant future for you; your tutor, alarmed by your attachment to a certain cottage at Ascot which was minus a host, thanked his stars to be rid of you. At Oxford you closed all books, except, of course, betting-books.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I detected the tendency of the age—scholarship

for the masses. I considered it my turn to be merely intuitively intelligent.

AGNES.

You left Oxford a gambler and spendthrift. A year or two in town established you as an amiable, undisguised debauchee. The rest is modern history.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Complete your sketch. Don't stop at the—rude outline.

AGNES.

Your affairs falling into disorder, you promptly married a wealthy woman—the poor, rich lady who has for some years honoured you by being your duchess at a distance. This burlesque of marriage helped to reassure your friends, and actually obtained for you an ornamental appointment for which an over-taxed nation provides a handsome stipend. But, to sum up, you must always remain an irritating source of uneasiness to your own order, as, luckily, you will always be a sharp-edged weapon in the hands of mine.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*With a polite smile.*] Yours! Ah, to that small,

unruly section to which I understand you particularly attach yourself. To the——

AGNES.

[*With changed manner, flashing eyes, harsh voice, and violent gestures.*] The sufferers, the toilers ; that great crowd of old and young—old and young stamped by excessive labour and privation all of one pattern—whose backs bend under burdens, whose bones ache and grow awry, whose skins, in youth and in age, are wrinkled and yellow ; those from whom a fair share of the earth's space and of the light of day is withheld. [*Looking down upon him fiercely.*] The half-starved who are bidden to stand with their feet in the kennel to watch gay processions in which you and your kind are borne high. Those who would strip the robes from a dummy aristocracy and cast the broken dolls into the limbo of a nation's discarded toys. Those who—mark me !—are already upon the highway, marching, marching ; whose time is coming as surely as yours is going !

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Clapping his hands gently.*] Bravo ! bravo ! Really a flash of the old fire. Admirable ! [*She*

walks away to the window with an impatient exclamation.] Your present *affaire du cœur* does not wholly absorb you, then, Mrs. Ebbsmith. Even now the murmurings of love have not entirely superseded the thunderous denunciations of—h'm—— You once bore a nickname, my dear.

AGNES.

[*Turning sharply.*] Ho! so you've heard *that*, have you?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh, yes.

AGNES.

Mad—Agnes? [*He bows deprecatingly.*] We appear to have studied each other's history pretty closely.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Dear lady, this is not the first time the same roof has covered us.

AGNES.

No?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Five years ago, on a broiling night in July, I joined a party of men who made an excursion from a club-

house in St. James's Street to the unsavoury district of St. Luke's.

AGNES.

Oh, yes.

ST. OLPHERTS.

A depressin' building; the Iron Hall, Barker Street—no—Carter Street.

AGNES.

Precisely.

ST. OLPHERTS.

We took our places amongst a handful of frowsty folks who cracked nuts and blasphemed. On the platform stood a gaunt, white-faced young lady resolutely engaged in making up by extravagance of gesture for the deficiencies of an exhausted voice. "There," said one of my companions, "that is the notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith." Upon which a person near us, whom I judged from his air of leaden laziness to be a British working man, blurted out, "Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith! Mad Agnes! That's the name her sanguinary friends give her—Mad Agnes!" At that moment the eye of the panting oratress caught mine for an instant, and you and I first met.

AGNES.

[*Passing her hand across her brow, thoughtfully.*]
Mad—Agnes [*To him, with a grim smile.*] We
have both been criticised, in our time, pretty sharply,
eh, Duke ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Yes. Let that reflection make you more charitable
to a poor peer. [*A knock at the door.*]

AGNES.

Entrez !

FORTUNÉ and ANTONIO enter, ANTONIO carrying tea,
&c., upon a tray.

AGNES.

[*To ST. OLPHERTS.*] You drink tea—fellow-sufferer?
[*He signifies assent. FORTUNÉ places the tray
on the table, then withdraws with ANTONIO.*
AGNES pours out tea.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Producing a little box from his waistcoat pocket.*]
No milk, dear lady. And may I be allowed—sac-
charine ?

[*She hands him his cup of tea ; their eyes meet.*]

AGNES.

[*Scornfully.*] Tell me now—really—why do the Cleeves send a rip like you to do their serious work?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Laughing heartily.*] Ha, ha, ha! Rip! ha, ha! Poor solemn family! Oh, set a thief to catch a thief, you know. That, I presume, is their motive.

AGNES.

[*Pausing in the act of pouring out tea, and staring at him.*] What do you mean?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Sipping his tea.*] Set a thief to catch a thief. And by deduction, set one sensualist—who, after all, doesn't take the trouble to deceive himself—to rescue another who does.

AGNES.

If I understand you, that is an insinuation against Mr. Cleeve.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Insinuation!—

AGNES.

[*Looking at him fixedly.*] Make yourself clearer.

ST. OLPHERTS.

You have accused me, Mrs. Ebbsmith, of narrowness of outlook. In the present instance, dear lady, it is *your* judgment which is at fault.

AGNES.

Mine?

ST. OLPHERTS.

It is not I who fall into the error of confounding you with the designing *danseuse* of commerce; it is, strangely enough, you who have failed in your estimate of Mr. Lucas Cleeve.

AGNES.

What is my estimate?

ST. OLPHERTS.

I pay you the compliment of believing that you have looked upon my nephew as a talented young gentleman whose future was seriously threatened by domestic disorder; a young man of a certain courage

and independence, with a share of the brain and spirit of those terrible human pests called reformers; the one young gentleman, in fact, most likely to aid you in advancing your vivacious social and political tenets. You have had such thoughts in your mind?

AGNES.

I don't deny it.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Ah! But what is the real, the actual Lucas Cleeve?

AGNES.

Well—what is the real Lucas Cleeve?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Poor dear fellow! I'll tell you. [*Going to the table to deposit his cup there; while she watches him, her hands tightly clasped, a frightened look in her eyes.*] The real Lucas Cleeve. [*Coming back to her.*] An egoist. An egoist.

AGNES.

An egoist. Yes.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Possessing ambition without patience, self-esteem without self-confidence.

AGNES.

Well ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Afflicted with a desperate craving for the opium-like drug, adulation ; persistently seeking the society of those whose white, pink-tipped fingers fill the pernicious pipe most deftly and delicately. Eh ?

AGNES.

I didn't—— Pray, go on.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Ha ! I remember they looked to his marriage to check his dangerous fancy for the flutter of lace, the purr of pretty women. And now, here he is—loose again.

AGNES.

[*Suffering.*] Oh !——

ST. OLPHERTS.

In short, in intellect still nothing but a callow boy ; in body, nervous, bloodless, hysterical ; in morals—
an epicure.

AGNES.

Have done ! Have done !

ST. OLPHERTS.

“Epicure” offends you. A vain woman would find consolation in the word.

AGNES.

Enough of it! Enough! enough!

[She turns away, beating her hands together. The light in the room has gradually become subdued; the warm tinge of sunset now colours the scene outside the windows.]

ST. OLPHERTS.

[With a shrug of his shoulders.] The real Lucas Cleeve.

AGNES.

No, no! Untrue, untrue! *[LUCAS enters. The three remain silent for a moment.]* The Duke of St. Olpherts calls in answer to a letter I wrote to him yesterday. I wanted to make his acquaintance,

[She goes out.]

LUCAS.

[After a brief pause.] By a lucky accident the tables were crowded at Florian’s; I might have missed the chance of welcoming you. In God’s name, Duke, why must you come here?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Fumbling in his pockets for a note.*] In God's name? You bring the orthodoxy into this queer firm, then, Lucas? [*Handing the note to LUCAS.*] A peremptory summons.

LUCAS.

You need not have obeyed it. [ST. OLPHERTS *takes a cigarette from his case and limps away.*] I looked about for you just now. I wanted to see you.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Lighting his cigarette.*] How fortunate——!

LUCAS.

To tell you that this persecution must come to an end. It has made me desperately wretched for a whole week.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Persecution?

LUCAS.

Temptation.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Dear Lucas, the process of inducing a man to return to his wife isn't generally described as temptation.

LUCAS.

Ah, I won't hear another word of that proposal. [ST. OLPHERTS *shrugs his shoulders.*] I say my people are offering me, through you, a deliberate temptation to be a traitor. To which of these two women—my wife or—[*pointing to the door*]*—to her—am I really bound now?* It may be regrettable, scandalous, but the common rules of right and wrong have ceased to apply here. Finally, Duke—and this is my message—I intend to keep faith with the woman who sat by my bedside in Rome, the woman to whom I shouted my miserable story in my delirium, the woman whose calm, resolute voice healed me, hardened me, renewed in me the desire to live.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Ah! Oh, these modern nurses, in their greys, or browns, and snowy bibs! They have much to answer for, dear Lucas.

LUCAS.

No, no! Why will you persist, all of you, in regarding this as a mere morbid infatuation, bred in the fumes of pastilles? It isn't so! Laugh, if you care to; but this is a meeting of affinities, of the solitary man and the truly sympathetic woman.

ST. OLPHERTS.

And oh—oh these sympathetic women !

LUCAS.

No ! Oh, the unsympathetic women ! There you have the cause of half the world's misery. The unsympathetic women—you should have loved one of them.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I dare say I've done that in my time.

LUCAS.

Love one of these women—I know !—worship her, yield yourself to the intoxicating day-dreams that make the grimy world sweeter than any heaven ever imagined. How your heart leaps with gratitude for your good fortune ! how compassionately you regard your unblest fellow-men ! What may you not accomplish with such a mate beside you ; how high will be your aims, how paltry every obstacle that bars your way to them ; how sweet is to be the labour, how divine the rest ! Then—you marry her. Marry her, and in six months, if you've pluck enough to do it, lag behind your shooting-party and blow your brains out, by accident, at the edge of a turnip-field. You

have found out by that time all that there is to look for—the daily diminishing interest in your doings, the poorly-assumed attention as you attempt to talk over some plan for the future ; then the yawn, and, by degrees, the covert sneer, the little sarcasm, and finally, the frank, open stare of boredom. Ah, Duke, when you all carry out your repressive legislation against women of evil lives, don't fail to include in your schedule the Unsympathetic Wives. They are the women whose victims show the sorriest scars ; they are the really “bad women” of the world : all the others are snow-white in comparison !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Yes, you've got a great deal of this in that capital Essay you quoted from this morning. Dear fellow, I admit your home discomforts ; but to jump out of that frying-pan into this confounded—what does she call it ?—compact !

LUCAS.

Compact ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

A vague reference, as I understand, to your joint crusade against the blessed institution of Marriage.

LUCAS.

[*An alteration in his manner.*] Oh—ho, that idea !
What—what has she been saying to you ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Incidentally she pitched into me, dear Lucas ; she attacked my moral character. You must have been telling tales.

LUCAS.

Oh, I—I hope not. Of course, we——

ST. OLPHERTS.

Yes, yes—a little family gossip, to pass the time while she has been dressing her hair, or—— By the bye, she doesn't appear to spend much time in dressing her hair.

LUCAS.

[*Biting his lip.*] Really ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Then she denounced the gilded aristocracy generally. Our day is over ; we're broken wooden dolls, and are going to be chucked. The old tune ; but I enjoyed the novelty of being so near the instrument. I

assure you, dear fellow, I was within three feet of her when she deliberately Trafalgar Squared me.

LUCAS.

[*With an uneasy laugh.*] You're the red rag, Duke. This spirit of revolt in her—it's ludicrously extravagant; but it will die out in time, when she has become used to being happy and cared for—[*partly to himself, with clenched hands*]—yes, cared for.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Die out? Bred in the bone, dear Lucas.

LUCAS.

On some topics she's a mere echo of her father—if you mean that?

ST. OLPHERTS.

The father—one of these public-park vermin, eh?

LUCAS.

Dead years ago.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I once heard her bellowing in a dirty little shed in St. Luke's. I told you?

LUCAS.

Yes, you've told me.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I sat there again, it seemed, this afternoon. The orator not quite so lean perhaps—a little less witch-like ; but——

LUCAS.

She was actually in want of food in those days ! Poor girl ! [*Partly to himself.*] I mean to remind myself of that constantly. Poor girl !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Girl ! Let me see—you're considerably her junior ?

LUCAS.

No, no ; a few months perhaps.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh, come !

LUCAS.

Well, years—two or three.

ST. OLPHERTS.

The voice remains rather raucous.

LUCAS.

By God, the voice is sweet !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Well—considering the wear and tear. Really, my dear fellow, I do believe this—I do believe that if you gowned her respectably——

LUCAS.

[*Impulsively.*] Yes, yes, I say so. I tell her that.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*With a smile.*] Do you ? That's odd, now.

LUCAS.

What a topic ! Poor Agnes's dress !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Your taste used to be rather æsthetic. Even your own wife is one of the smartest women in London.

LUCAS.

Ha, well, I must contrive to smother these æsthetic tastes of mine.

ST. OLPHERTS.

It's a pity that other people will retain their sense of the incongruous.

LUCAS.

[*Snapping his fingers.*] Other people !——

ST. OLPHERTS.

The public.

LUCAS.

The public ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Come, you know well enough that unostentatious immodesty is no part of your partner's programme. Of course, you will find yourself by-and-bye in a sort of perpetual public parade with your crack-brained visionary——

LUCAS.

You shall not speak of her so ! You shall not.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Unconcernedly.*] Each of you bearing a pole of the soiled banner of Free Union. Free Union for the People ! Ho, my dear Lucas !

LUCAS.

Good heavens, Duke, do you imagine, now that I am in sound health and mind again, that I don't see the hideous absurdity of these views of hers?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Then why the deuce don't you listen a little more patiently to *my* views?

LUCAS.

No, no. I tell you I intend to keep faith with her, as far as I am able. She's so earnest, so pitiably earnest. If I broke faith with her entirely, it would be too damnably cowardly.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Cowardly!

LUCAS.

[*Pacing the room agitatedly.*] Besides, we shall do well together, after all, I believe—she and I. In the end we shall make concessions to each other and settle down, somewhere abroad, peacefully.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Hah! And they called you a Coming Man at one time, didn't they?

LUCAS.

Oh, I—I shall make as fine a career with my pen as that other career would have been. At any rate, I ask you to leave me to it all—to leave me !

FORTUNÉ *enters. The shades of evening have now deepened ; the glow of sunset comes into the room.*

FORTUNÉ.

I beg your pardon, sir.

LUCAS.

Well ?

FORTUNÉ.

It is pas' ze time for you to dress for dinner.

LUCAS.

I'll come.

[FORTUNÉ *goes out.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

When do we next meet, dear fellow ?

LUCAS.

No, no—please not again.

NELLA *enters, excitedly.*

NELLA.

[*Speaking over her shoulder.*] Si, Signora; ecco il Signore. (Yes, Signora; here is the Signor.) [*To CLEEVE.*] Scusi, Signore. Quando la vedrà come é cara——! (Pardon, Signor. When you see her you'll see how sweet she looks——!)

[*AGNES's voice is heard.*

AGNES.

[*Outside.*] Am I keeping you waiting, Lucas?

She enters, handsomely gowned, her throat and arms bare, the fashion of her hair roughly altered. She stops abruptly upon seeing ST. OLPHERTS; a strange light comes into her eyes; her voice, manner, bearing, all express triumph. The two men stare at her blankly. She appears to be a beautiful woman.

AGNES.

[*To NELLA.*] Un petit châle noir tricoté—cher-chez-le. [*NELLA withdraws.*] Ah, you are not dressed, Lucas dear.

LUCAS.

What—what time is it?

[*He goes towards the door, still staring at*

AGNES.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Looking at her, and speaking in an altered tone.*] I fear my gossiping has delayed him. You—you dine out?

AGNES.

At the Grünwald. Why don't you join us? [*Turning to LUCAS, lightly.*] Persuade him, Lucas.

[LUCAS *pauses at the door.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

Er — impossible. Some — friends of mine may arrive to-night. [LUCAS *goes out.*] I am more than sorry.

AGNES.

[*Mockingly.*] Really? You are sure you are not shy of being seen with a notorious woman?

ST. OLPHERTS.

My dear Mrs. Ebbsmith——!

AGNES.

No, I forget—that would be unlike you. *Mud* people scare you, perhaps?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Ha, ha! Don't be too rough.

AGNES.

Come, Duke, confess—isn't there more sanity in me than you suspected?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*In a low voice, eyeing her.*] Much more. I think you are very clever.

LUCAS *quietly re-enters the room; he halts upon seeing that* ST. OLPHERTS *still lingers.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*With a wave of the hand to* LUCAS.] Just off, dear fellow. [*He offers his hand to* AGNES; *she quickly places hers behind her back.*] You—you are charming. [*He walks to the door, then looks round at the pair.*] Au'voir! [ST. OLPHERTS *goes out.*]

AGNES.

Au'voir! [*Her head drooping suddenly, her voice hard and dull.*] You had better take me to Fulci's before we dine, and buy me some gloves.

LUCAS.

[*Coming to her, and seizing her hand.*] Agnes dear!

AGNES.

[*Releasing herself and sitting with a heavy, almost sullen, look upon her face.*] Are you satisfied?

LUCAS.

[*By her side.*] You have delighted me! How sweet you look!

AGNES.

Ah!——

LUCAS.

You shall have twenty new gowns now; you shall see the women envying you, the men envying me. Ah, ha! fifty new gowns! You will wear them?

AGNES.

Yes.

LUCAS.

Why, what has brought about this change in you?

AGNES.

What!

LUCAS.

What?

AGNES.

I know.

LUCAS.

You know?

AGNES.

Exactly how you regard me.

LUCAS.

I don't understand you——

AGNES.

Listen. Long ago, in Florence, I began to suspect that we had made a mistake, Lucas. Even there I began to suspect that your nature was not one to allow you to go through life sternly, severely, looking upon me more and more each day as a fellow-worker, and less and less as—a woman. I suspected this—oh, proved it!—but still made myself believe that this companionship of ours would gradually become, in a sense, colder—more temperate, more impassive. [*Beating her brow.*] Never! never! Oh, a few minutes ago this man, who means to part us if he can, drew your character, disposition, in a dozen words.

LUCAS.

You believe *him*! You credit what *he* says of me!

AGNES.

I declared it to be untrue. Oh, but——

LUCAS.

But—but—— !

AGNES.

[*Rising, seizing his arm.*] The picture he paints of you is not wholly a false one. Sssh ! Lucas. Hark ! attend to me ! I resign myself to it all ! Dear, I must resign myself to it !

LUCAS.

Resign yourself ? Has life with me become so distasteful ?

AGNES.

Has it ? Think ! Why, when I realised the actual conditions of our companionship—why didn't I go on my own way stoically ? Why don't I go at this moment ?

LUCAS.

You really *love* me, do you mean—as simple, tender women are content to love ? [*She looks at him, nods slowly, then turns away and droops over the table. He raises her, and takes her in his arms.*]

My dear girl! My dear, cold, warm-hearted girl! Ha! You couldn't bear to see me packed up in one of the Duke's travelling boxes and borne back to London—eh? [*She shakes her head; her lips form the word "No."*] No fear of that, my—my sweetheart!

AGNES.

[*Gently pushing him from her.*] Quick—dress—take me out.

LUCAS.

You are shivering; go and get your thickest wrap.

AGNES.

That heavy brown cloak of mine?

LUCAS.

Yes.

AGNES.

It's an old friend, but—dreadfully *shabby*. You will be ashamed of me again.

LUCAS.

Ashamed!—

AGNES.

I'll write to Bardini about a new one to-morrow. I won't oppose you—I won't repel you any more.

LUCAS.

Repel me ! I only urged you to reveal yourself as what you are—a beautiful woman.

AGNES.

Ah ! Am I—that ?

LUCAS.

[*Kissing her.*] Beautiful—beautiful !

AGNES.

[*With a gesture of abandonment.*] I—I'm glad.

[*She leaves him and goes out. He looks after her for a moment thoughtfully, then suddenly passes his hands across his brow and opens his arms widely as if casting a burden from him.*]

LUCAS.

Oh !—oh ! [*Turning away alertly.*] Fortuné——

END OF THE SECOND ACT.

THE THIRD ACT

The Scene is the same as before, but it is evening, and the lamps are lighted within the room, while outside is bright moonlight.

AGNES, *dressed as at the end of the preceding Act, is lying upon the settee propped up by pillows. A pretty silk shawl, with which she plays restlessly, is over her shoulders. Her face is pale, but her eyes glitter, and her voice has a bright ring in it. KIRKE is seated at a table writing. GERTRUDE, without hat or mantle, is standing behind the settee, looking down smilingly upon AGNES.*

KIRKE.

[*Writing.*] H'm—— [*To AGNES.*] Are you often guilty of this sort of thing?

AGNES.

[*Laughing.*] I've never fainted before in my life; I don't mean to do so again.

KIRKE.

[*Writing.*] Should you alter your mind about that, do select a suitable spot on the next occasion. What was it your head came against?

GERTRUDE.

A wooden chest, Mr. Cleeve thinks.

AGNES.

With beautiful, rusty, iron clamps. [*Putting her hand to her head, and addressing GERTRUDE.*] The price of vanity.

KIRKE.

Vanity?

AGNES.

Lucas was to take me out to dinner. While I was waiting for him to dress I must needs stand and survey my full length in a mirror.

KIRKE.

[*Glancing at her.*] A very excusable proceeding.

AGNES.

Suddenly the room sank and left me—so the feeling was—in air.

KIRKE.

Well, most women can manage to look into their pier-glasses without swooning—eh, Mrs. Thorpe?

GERTRUDE.

[*Smiling.*] How should I know, doctor

KIRKE.

[*Blotting his writing.*] There. How goes the time?

GERTRUDE.

Half past eight.

KIRKE.

I'll leave this prescription at Mantovani's myself. I can get it made up to-night.

AGNES.

[*Taking the prescription out of his hand playfully.*]
Let me look.

KIRKE.

[*Protesting.*] Now, now !

AGNES.

[*Reading the prescription.*] Ha, ha ! After all, what humbugs doctors are !

KIRKE.

You've never heard me deny it.

AGNES.

[*Returning the prescription to him.*] But I'll swallow it—for the dignity of my old profession.

[*She reaches out her hand to take a cigarette.*

KIRKE.

Don't smoke too many of those things.

AGNES.

They never harm me. It's a survival of the time in my life when the cupboard was always empty. [*Striking a match.*] Only it had to be stronger tobacco in those days, I can tell you.

[*She lights her cigarette.* GERTRUDE is assisting KIRKE with his overcoat. LUCAS enters, in evening dress, looking younger, almost boyish.

LUCAS.

[*Brightly*] Well?

KIRKE.

She's to have a cup of good *bouillon*—MRS. Thorpe

is going to look after that—and anything else she fancies. She's all right. [*Shaking hands with AGNES.*] The excitement of putting on that pretty frock— [*AGNES gives a hard little laugh. Shaking hands with LUCAS.*] I'll look in to-morrow. [*Turning to GERTRUDE.*] Oh, just a word with you, nurse.

[*LUCAS has been bending over AGNES affectionately; he now sits by her, and they talk in undertones; he lights a cigarette from hers.*]

KIRKE.

[*To GERTRUDE.*] There's many a true word, *et cetera*.

GERTRUDE.

Excitement?

KIRKE.

Yes, and that smart gown's connected with it too.

GERTRUDE.

It is extraordinary to see her like this.

KIRKE.

Not the same woman.

GERTRUDE.

No, nor is he quite the same man.

KIRKE.

How long can you remain with her?

GERTRUDE.

Till eleven—if you will let my brother know where I am.

KIRKE.

What, doesn't he know?

GERTRUDE.

I simply sent word, about an hour ago, that I shouldn't be back to dinner.

KIRKE.

Very well.

GERTRUDE.

Look here! I'll get you to tell him the truth.

KIRKE.

The truth—oh?

GERTRUDE.

I called her this afternoon, unknown to Amos, to bid her good-bye. Then I pottered about, rather miserably, spending money. Coming out of Naya's,

the photographer's, I tumbled over Mr. Cleeve, who had been looking for you, and he begged me to come round here again after I had done my shopping.

KIRKE.

I understand.

GERTRUDE.

Doctor, have you ever seen Amos look dreadfully stern and knit about the brows—like a bishop who is put out?

KIRKE.

No.

GERTRUDE.

Then you will.

KIRKE.

Well, this is a pretty task——!

[*He goes out.* GERTRUDE comes to AGNES.

LUCAS rises.

GERTRUDE.

I am going down into the kitchen to see what these people can do in the way of strong soup.

LUCAS.

You are exceedingly good to us, Mrs. Thorpe. I

can't tell you how ashamed I am of my bearishness this afternoon.

GERTRUDE.

[*Arranging the shawl about AGNES's shoulders.*]
Hush, please !

AGNES.

Are you looking at my shawl ? Lucas brought it in with him, as a reward for my coming out of that stupid faint. I—I have always refused to be—spoilt in this way, but now—now——

LUCAS.

[*Breaking in deliberately.*] Pretty work upon it, is there not, Mrs. Thorpe ?

GERTRUDE.

Charming. [*Going to the door, which LUCAS opens for her.*] Thank you. [*She passes out. AGNES rises.*

LUCAS.

Oh, my dear girl !——

AGNES.

[*Throwing her cigarette under the stove.*] I'm quite myself again, Lucas dear. Watch me—look !

[*Walking firmly.*

LUCAS.

No trembling ?

AGNES.

Not a flutter. [*Watching her open hand.*] My hand is absolutely steady. [*He takes her hand and kisses it upon the palm.*] Ah !——

LUCAS.

[*Looking at her hand.*] No, it is shaking.

AGNES.

Yes, when you—when you—oh, Lucas !——

[*She sinks into a chair, turning her back upon him, and covering her face with her hands ; her shoulders heaving.*]

LUCAS.

[*Going to her.*] Agnes dear !

AGNES.

[*Taking out her handkerchief.*] Let me—let me——

LUCAS.

[*Bending over her.*] I've never seen you——

AGNES.

No, I've never been a crying woman. But some great change has befallen me, I believe. What is it? That swoon—it wasn't mere faintness, giddiness; it was this change coming over me!

LUCAS.

You are not unhappy?

AGNES.

[*Wiping her eyes.*] No, I—I don't think I am. Isn't that strange?

LUCAS.

My dearest, I'm glad to hear you say that, for you've made me very happy.

AGNES.

Because I——?

LUCAS.

Because you love me—naturally, that's one great reason.

AGNES.

I have always loved you,

LUCAS.

But never so utterly, so absorbingly, as you confess you do now. Do you fully realise what your confession does? It strikes off the shackles from me, from us—sets us free. [*With a gesture of freedom.*] Oh, my dear Agnes, free!

AGNES.

[*Staring at him.*] Free?

LUCAS.

Free from the burden of that crazy plan of ours of trumpeting our relations to the world. Forgive me—crazy is the only word for it. Thank heaven, we've at last admitted to each other that we're ordinary man and woman! Of course, I was ill—off my head. I didn't know what I was entering upon. And you, dear—living a pleasureless life, letting your thoughts dwell constantly on old troubles; that is how cranks are made. Now that I'm strong again, body and mind, I can protect you, keep you right. Ha, ha! What were we to pose as? Examples of independence of thought and action! [*Laughing.*] Oh, my darling, we'll be independent in thought and action still; but we won't make examples of ourselves—eh?

AGNES.

[*Who has been watching him with wide-open eyes.*]
Do you mean that all idea of our writing together, working together, defending our position, and the positions of such as ourselves, before the world, is to be abandoned?

LUCAS.

Why, of course.

AGNES.

I—I didn't quite mean that.

LUCAS.

Oh, come, come! We'll furl what my uncle calls the banner of Free Union finally. [*Going to her and kissing her hair lightly.*] For the future, mere man and woman. [*Pacing the room excitedly.*] The future! I've settled everything already. The work shall fall wholly on *my* shoulders. My poor girl, you shall enjoy a little rest and pleasure.

AGNES.

[*In a low voice.*] Rest and pleasure——

LUCAS.

We'll remain abroad. One can live unobserved

abroad, without actually hiding. [*She rises slowly.*] We'll find an ideal retreat. No more English tourists prying round us! And there, in some beautiful spot, alone except for your company, I'll work! [*As he paces the room, she walks slowly to and fro, listening, staring before her.*] I'll work. My new career! I'll write under a *nom de plume*. My books, Agnes, shall never ride to popularity on the back of a scandal. Our life! The mornings I must spend by myself, of course, shut up in my room. In the afternoon we will walk together. After dinner you shall hear what I've written in the morning; and then a few turns round our pretty garden, a glance at the stars with my arms round your waist—[*she stops abruptly, a look of horror on her face*—while you whisper to me words of tenderness, words of—— [*There is the distant sound of music from mandolin and guitar.*] Ah! [*To AGNES.*] Keep your shawl over your shoulders. [*Opening the window, and stepping out; the music becoming louder.*] Some mandolinisti in a gondola. [*Listening at the window, his head turned from her.*] How pretty, Agnes! Now, don't those mere sounds, in such surroundings, give you a sensation of hatred for revolt and turmoil! Don't they conjure up alluringly pictures of peace and pleasure, of golden

days and star-lit nights—pictures of beauty and of love?

AGNES.

[*Sitting on the settee, staring before her, speaking to herself.*] My marriage—the early days of my marriage—all over again!

LUCAS.

[*Turning to her.*] Eh? [*Closing the window and coming to her, as the music dies away.*] Tell me that those sounds thrill you.

AGNES.

Lucas——

LUCAS.

[*Sitting beside her.*] Yes?

AGNES.

For the first few months of my marriage—— [*Breaking off abruptly and looking into his face wonderingly.*] Why, how young you seem to have become; you look quite boyish!

LUCAS.

[*Laughing.*] I believe that this return of our senses will make us both young again.

AGNES.

Both? [*With a little shudder.*] You know, I'm older than you.

LUCAS.

Tsch!

AGNES.

[*Passing her hand through his hair.*] Yes, I shall feel that now. [*Stroking his brow tenderly.*] Well—so it has come to this.

LUCAS.

I declare you have colour in your cheeks already.

AGNES.

The return of my senses?

LUCAS.

My dear Agnes, we've both been to the verge of madness, you and I—driven there by our troubles. [*Taking her hand.*] Let us agree, in so many words, that we have completely recovered. Shall we?

AGNES.

Perhaps mine is a more obstinate case. My enemies called me mad years ago.

LUCAS.

[*With a wave of the hand.*] Ah, but the future, the future. No more thoughts of reforming unequal laws from public platforms, no more shrieking in obscure magazines. No more beating of bare knuckles against stone walls. Come, say it!

AGNES.

[*With an effort.*] Go on.

LUCAS.

[*Looking before him—partly to himself, his voice hardening.*] I'll never be mad again—never. [*Throwing his head back.*] By heavens! [*To her, in an altered tone.*] You don't say it.

AGNES.

[*After a pause.*] I—I will never be mad again.

LUCAS.

[*Triumphantly.*] Hah! ha, ha! [*She deliberately removes the shawl from her shoulders, and, putting her arms round his neck, draws him to her.*] Ah, my dear girl!

AGNES.

[*In a whisper, with her head on his breast.*] Lucas.

LUCAS.

Yes?

AGNES.

Isn't *this* madness?

LUCAS.

I don't think so.

AGNES.

Oh! oh! oh! I believe, to be a woman is to be mad.

LUCAS.

No, to be a woman trying not to be a woman—that is to be mad.

[*She draws a long, deep breath, then, sitting away from him, resumes her shawl mechanically.*]

AGNES.

Now, you promised me to run out to the Capello Nero to get a little food.

LUCAS.

Oh, I'd rather——

AGNES.

[*Rising.*] Dearest, you need it.

LUCAS.

[*Rising.*] Well—Fortuné shall fetch my hat and coat.

AGNES.

Fortuné! Are you going to take *all* my work from me?

[*She is walking towards the door; the sound of his voice stops her.*

LUCAS.

Agnes! [*She returns.*] A thousand thoughts have rushed through my brain this last hour or two. I've been thinking—my wife——

AGNES.

Yes?

LUCAS.

My wife—she will soon get tired of her present position. If, by-and-bye, there should be a divorce, there would be nothing to prevent our marrying.

AGNES.

Our—marrying!

LUCAS.

[*Sitting, not looking at her, as if discussing the matter with himself.*] It might be to my advantage to settle again in London some day. After all, scandals quickly lose their keen edge. What would you say?

AGNES.

Marriage——

LUCAS.

Ah, remember, we're rational beings for the future. However, we needn't talk about it now.

AGNES.

No.

LUCAS.

Still, I assume you wouldn't oppose it. You would marry me if I wished it?

AGNES.

[*In a low voice.*] Yes.

LUCAS.

That's a sensible girl! By Jove, I *am* hungry!

[*He lights a cigarette as she walks slowly to the door, then throws himself idly back on the settee.*]

AGNES.

[*To herself, in a whisper.*] My old life—my old life coming all over again!

[*She goes out. He lies watching the wreaths of tobacco smoke. After a moment or two FORTUNÉ enters, closing the door behind him carefully.*

LUCAS.

Eh ?

FORTUNÉ.

[*After a glance round, dropping his voice.*] Ze Duke of St. Olphert 'e say 'e would like to speak a meenit alone.

[LUCAS rises, with a muttered exclamation of annoyance.

LUCAS.

Priez Monsieur le Duc d'entrer.

[FORTUNÉ goes to the door and opens it. The DUKE OF ST. OLPHERTS enters; he is in evening dress. FORTUNÉ retires.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Quite alone ?

LUCAS.

For the moment.

ST. OLPHERTS.

My excuse to Mrs. Ebbsmith for not dining at the Grünwald—it was a perfectly legitimate one, dear Lucas. I was really expecting visitors.

LUCAS.

[*Wonderingly.*] Yes?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*With a little cough and a drawn face.*] Oh, I am not so well to-night. Damn these people for troubling me! Damn 'em for keeping me hopping about! Damn 'em for every shoot I feel in my leg. Visitors from England—they've arrived.

LUCAS.

But what—— ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

I shall die of gout some day, Lucas. Er—your wife is here.

LUCAS.

Sybil !

ST. OLPHERTS.

She's come through with your brother. Sandford's a worse prig than ever—and I'm in shockin' pain.

LUCAS.

This—this is your doing!

ST. OLPHERTS.

Yes. Damn you, don't keep me standing!

AGNES *enters with LUCAS'S hat and coat. She stops abruptly on seeing ST. OLPHERTS.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*By the settee—playfully, through his pain*] Ah, my dear Mrs. Ebbsmith, how can you have the heart to deceive an invalid, a poor wretch who begs you —[*sitting on the settee*]—to allow him to sit down for a moment? [*AGNES deposits the hat and coat.*

AGNES.

Deceive——?

ST. OLPHERTS.

My friends arrive, I dine scrappily with them, and hurry to the Grünwald thinking to catch you over your Zabajone. Dear lady, you haven't been *near* the Grünwald.

AGNES.

Your women faint sometimes, don't they?

ST. OLPHERTS.

My——? [*In pain.*] Oh, what *do* you mean?

AGNES.

The women in your class of life?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Faint? Oh yes, when there's occasion for it.

AGNES.

I'm hopelessly low-born; I fainted involuntarily.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Moving nearer to her.*] Oh, my dear, pray forgive me. You've recovered? [*She nods.*] Indisposition agrees with you, evidently. Your colouring to-night is charming. [*Coughing.*] You are—delightful—to—look at.

GERTRUDE *enters, carrying a tray on which are a bowl of soup, a small decanter of wine, and accessories. She looks at ST. OLPHERTS unconcernedly, then turns away and places the tray on a table.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Quietly to AGNES.*] Not a servant?

AGNES.

Oh, no.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Rising promptly.*] Good God ! I beg your pardon.
A friend ?

AGNES.

Yes.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Looking at GERTRUDE, critically.*] Very nice.
[*Still looking at GERTRUDE, but speaking to AGNES in undertones.*] Married or—— ? [*Turning to AGNES.*]
Married or—— ? [*AGNES has walked away.*]

GERTRUDE.

[*To LUCAS, looking round.*] It is draughty at this table.

LUCAS.

[*Going to the table near the settee, and collecting the writing materials.*] Here——
[*AGNES joins GERTRUDE.*]

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Quietly to LUCAS.*] Lucas —— [*LUCAS goes to him.*]
Who's that gal ?

LUCAS.

[*To ST. OLPHERTS.*] An hotel acquaintance we made in Florence—Mrs. Thorpe.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Where's the husband ?

LUCAS.

A widow.

ST. OLPHERTS.

You might——

[GERTRUDE *advances with the tray.*

LUCAS.

Mrs. Thorpe, the Duke of St. Olpherts wishes to be introduced to you.

[GERTRUDE *inclines her head to the* DUKE.

LUCAS *places the writing materials on another table.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Limping up to* GERTRUDE *and handling the tray.*] I beg to be allowed to help you. [*At the table.*] The tray here ?

GERTRUDE.

Thank you.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Ha, how clumsy I am ! We think it so gracious of you to look after our poor friend here who is not

quite herself to-day. [*To AGNES.*] Come along, dear lady — everything is prepared for you. [*To GERTRUDE.*] You are here with—with your mother, I understand.

GERTRUDE.

My brother.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Brother. Now do tell me whether you find your —your little hotel comfortable.

GERTRUDE.

[*Looking at him steadily.*] We don't stay at one.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Apartments?

GERTRUDE.

Yes.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Do you know, dear Mrs. Thorpe, I have always had the very strongest desire to live in lodgings in Venice?

GERTRUDE.

You should gratify it. Our quarters are rather humble; we are in the Campo San Bartolomeo.

ST. OLPHERTS.

But how delightful !

GERTRUDE.

Why not come and see our rooms ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Bowing.*] My dear young lady ! [*Producing a pencil and writing upon his shirt-cuff.*] Campo San Bartolomeo——

GERTRUDE.

Five—four—nought—two.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Writing.*] Five—four—nought—two. To-morrow afternoon ? [*She inclines her head.*] Four o'clock ?

GERTRUDE.

Yes ; that would give the people ample time to tidy and clear up after us.

ST. OLPHERTS.

After you—— ?

GERTRUDE.

After our departure. My brother and I leave early to-morrow morning.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*After a brief pause, imperturbably.*] A thousand thanks. May I impose myself so far upon you as to ask you to tell your landlord to expect me? [*Taking up his hat and stick.*] We are allowing this soup to get cold. [*Joining LUCAS.*] Dear Lucas, you have something to say to me——?

LUCAS.

[*Opening the door.*] Come into my room.

[*They go out. The two women look at each other significantly.*]

AGNES.

You're a splendid woman.

GERTRUDE.

That's rather a bad man, I think. Now, dear——

[*She places AGNES on the settee, and sets the soup, &c., before her. AGNES eats.*]

GERTRUDE.

[*Watching her closely.*] So you have succeeded in coming to close quarters, as you expressed it, with him.

AGNES.

[*Taciturnly.*] Yes.

GERTRUDE.

His second visit here to-day, I gather.

AGNES.

Yes.

GERTRUDE.

His attitude towards you—his presence here under any circumstances—it's all rather queer.

AGNES.

His code of behaviour is peculiarly his own.

GERTRUDE

However, are you easier in your mind?

AGNES.

[*Quietly, but with intensity.*] I shall defeat him. I shall defeat him.

GERTRUDE.

Defeat him? You will succeed in holding Mr. Cleeve, you mean?

AGNES.

Oh, if you put it in that way——

GERTRUDE.

Oh, come, I remember all you told me this afternoon. [*With disdain.*] So it has already arrived, then, at a simple struggle to hold Mr. Cleeve?

[*There is a pause. AGNES, without answering, stretches out her hand to the wine. Her hand shakes—she withdraws it helplessly.*

GERTRUDE.

What do you want—wine?

[*AGNES nods. GERTRUDE pours out wine and gives her the glass. AGNES drains it eagerly and replaces it.*

GERTRUDE.

Agnes——

AGNES.

Yes?

GERTRUDE.

You are dressed very beautifully.

AGNES.

Do you think so?

GERTRUDE.

Don't you know it? Who made you that gown?

AGNES.

Bardini.

GERTRUDE.

I shouldn't have credited the little woman with such excellent ideas.

AGNES.

Oh, Lucas gave her the idea when he—when he——

GERTRUDE.

When he ordered it?

AGNES.

Yes.

GERTRUDE.

Oh, the whole thing came as a surprise to you?

AGNES.

Er—quite.

GERTRUDE.

I noticed the box this afternoon, when I called.

AGNES.

Mr. Cleeve wishes me to appear more like—more like——

GERTRUDE.

An ordinary smart woman. [*Contemptuously.*] Well, you ought to find no difficulty in managing that. You can make yourself very charming, it appears.

[*AGNES again reaches out a hand towards the wine. GERTRUDE pours a very little wine into the wine-glass and takes up the glass; AGNES holds out her hand to receive it.*

GERTRUDE.

Do you mind my drinking from your glass?

AGNES.

[*Staring at her.*] No.

[*GERTRUDE empties the glass and then places it, in a marked way, on the side of the table farthest from AGNES.*

GERTRUDE.

[*With a little shudder.*] Ugh! Ugh! [*AGNES moves away from GERTRUDE, to the end of the settee, her head bowed, her hands clenched.*] I have something to propose. Come home with me to-morrow.

AGNES.

[*After a pause, raising her head.*] Home——?

GERTRUDE.

Ketherick. The very spot for a woman who wants to shut out things. Miles and miles of wild moorland! For company, purple heath and moss-covered granite, in summer; in winter, the moor-fowl and the snow glistening on top of the crags. Oh, and for open-air music, our little church owns the sweetest little peal of old bells——! [AGNES rises, disturbed.] Ah, I can't promise you *their* silence! Indeed, I'm very much afraid that on a still Sunday you can even hear the sound of the organ quite a long distance off. I am the organist when I'm at home. That's Ketherick. Will you come?

[*The distant tinkling of mandolin and guitar is again heard.*]

AGNES.

Listen to that. The mandolinisti! You talk of the sound of your church organ, and I hear *his* music.

GERTRUDE.

His music?

AGNES.

The music he is fond of ; the music that gives him the thoughts that please him, soothe him.

GERTRUDE.

[*Listening—humming the words of the air, contemptuously :*

“ Bell’ amore deh ! porgi l’orecchio,
Ad un canto che parte dal cuore. . . .”]

Love-music !

AGNES.

[*In a low voice, staring upon the ground.*] Yes, love-music.

[*The door leading from LUCAS’S room opens, and ST. OLPHERTS and LUCAS are heard talking. GERTRUDE hastily goes out. LUCAS enters ; the boyishness of manner has left him—he is pale and excited.*

AGNES.

[*Apprehensively.*] What is the matter ?

LUCAS.

My wife is revealing quite a novel phase of character.

AGNES.

Your wife—— ?

LUCAS.

The submissive mood. It's right that you should be told, Agnes. She is here, at the Danieli, with my brother Sandford. [ST. OLPHERTS *enters slowly.*] Yes, positively ! It appears that she has lent herself to a scheme of Sandford's—[*glancing at St. OLPHERTS*]*—and of—and ——*

ST. OLPHERTS.

Of Sandford's.

LUCAS.

[*To AGNES*] A plan of reconciliation. [*To St. OLPHERTS.*] Tell Sybil that the submissive mood comes too late, by a year or so !

[*He paces to and fro.* AGNES *sits, with an expressionless face.*

AGNES.

[*Quietly, to St. OLPHERTS.*] The "friends" you were expecting, Duke ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Meekly.*] Yes. [*She smiles at him scornfully.*

LUCAS.

Agnes dear, you and I leave here early to-morrow.

AGNES.

Very well, Lucas.

LUCAS.

[*To* ST. OLPHERTS.] Duke, will you be the bearer of a note from me to Sandford ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Certainly.

LUCAS.

[*Going to the door of his room.*] I'll write it at once.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Raising his voice.*] You won't see Sandford, then, dear Lucas, for a moment or two ?

LUCAS.

No, no ; pray excuse me.

[*He goes out.* ST. OLPHERTS advances to
AGNES. *The sound of the music dies away.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Slipping his coat off and throwing it upon the head of the settee.*] Upon my soul, I think you've routed us!

AGNES.

Yes.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Sitting, breaking into a laugh.*] Ha, ha! he, he, he! Sir Sandford and Mrs. Cleeve will be so angry. Such a devil of a journey for nothing! Ho! [*Coughing.*] Ho, ho, ho!

AGNES.

This was to be your *grand coup*.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I admit it—I *have* been keeping this in reserve.

AGNES.

I see. A further term of cat-and-dog life for Lucas and this lady—but it would have served to dispose of *me*, you fondly imagined. I see.

ST. OLPHERTS.

I knew your hold on him was weakening. [*She*

looks at him.] You knew it too. [*She looks away.*] He was beginning to find out that a dowdy demagogue is not the cheeriest person to live with. I repeat, you're a dooced clever woman, my dear. [*She rises, with an impatient shake of her body, and walks past him, he following her with his eyes.*] And a handsome one, into the bargain.

AGNES.

Tsch!

ST. OLPHERTS.

Tell me, when did you make up your mind to transform yourself?

AGNES.

Suddenly, after our interview this afternoon; after what you said——

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh——!

AGNES.

[*With a little shiver.*] An impulse.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Impulse doesn't account for the possession of those gorgeous trappings.

AGNES.

These rags ? A surprise gift from Lucas, to-day.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Really, my dear, I believe I've helped to bring about my own defeat. [*Laughing softly.*] Ho, ho, ho ! How disgusted the Cleeve family will be ! Ha, ha ! [*Testily.*] Come, why don't you smile—laugh ? You can afford to do so ! Show your pretty white teeth ! Laugh !

AGNES.

[*Hysterically.*] Ha, ha, ha ! Ha !

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Grinning.*] That's better !

[*Pushing the cigarette-box towards him, she takes a cigarette and places it between her lips. He also takes a cigarette gaily. They smoke—she standing, with an elbow resting upon the top of the stove, looking down upon him.*]

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*As he lights his cigarette.*] This isn't explosive, I

hope? No nitric and sulphuric acid, with glycerine—eh? [*Eyeing her wonderingly and admiringly.*] By Jove! Which is *you*—the shabby, shapeless rebel who entertained me this afternoon or—[*kissing the tips of his fingers to her*]*—or that?*

AGNES.

This—this. [*Seating herself, slowly and thoughtfully, facing the stove, her back turned to him.*] My sex has found me out.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Ha! tsch! [*Between his teeth.*] Damn it, for your sake I almost wish Lucas was a different sort of feller!

AGNES.

[*Partly to herself, with intensity.*] Nothing matters now—not even that. He's mine. He would have died but for me. I gave him life. He is my child, my husband, my lover, my bread, my daylight—all—everything. Mine! Mine!

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Rising and limping over to her.*] Good luck, my girl

AGNES.

Thanks !

ST. OLPHERTS.

I'm rather sorry for you. This sort of triumph is short-lived, you know.

AGNES.

[*Turning to him.*] I know. But I shall fight for every moment that prolongs it. This is my hour.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Your hour—— ?

AGNES.

There's only one hour in a woman's life.

ST. OLPHERTS.

One—— ?

AGNES.

One supreme hour. Her poor life is like the arch of a crescent ; so many years lead up to that hour, so many weary years decline from it. No matter what she may strive for, there is a moment when Circumstance taps her upon the shoulder and says, " Woman, this hour is the best that Earth has to spare you." It may come to her in calm or in tempest, lighted by a

steady radiance or by the glitter of evil stars; but however it comes, be it good or evil, *it is her hour*—let her dwell upon every second of it!

ST. OLPHERTS.

And this little victory of yours—the possession of this man; you think this is the best that Earth can spare you? [*She nods slowly and deliberately, with fixed eyes.*] Dear me, how amusin' you women are! And in your dowdy days you had ambitions? [*She looks at him suddenly.*] They were of a queer, gun-powder-and-faggot sort—but they were ambitions.

AGNES.

[*Starting up.*] Oh——! [*Putting her hands to her brows.*] Oh——! [*Facing him.*] Ambitions! Yes, yes! You're right! Once, long ago, I hoped that my hour would be very different from this. Ambitions! I have seen myself, standing, humbly-clad, looking down upon a dense, swaying crowd—a scarlet flag for my background. I have seen the responsive look upon thousands of white, eager, hungry faces, and I've heard the great hoarse shout of welcome as I have seized my flag and hurried down amongst the people—to be given a place with their leaders! I!

With the leaders, the leaders ! Yes, that is what I once hoped would be my hour ! [*Her voice sinking.*] But this *is* my hour.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Well, my dear, when it's over, you'll have the satisfaction of counting the departing footsteps of a ruined man.

AGNES.

Ruined—— !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Yes, there's great compensation in that — for women.

AGNES.

[*Sitting.*] Why do you suggest he'll be ruined through me ? [*Uneasily.*] At any rate, he'd ended his old career before we met.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Pardon me ; it's not too late now for him to resume that career. The threads are not quite broken yet.

AGNES.

Oh, the scandal in London——

ST. OLPHERTS.

Would be dispelled by this sham reconciliation with his wife.

AGNES.

[*Looking at him.*] Sham——?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Why, of course. All we desired to arrange was that for the future their household should be conducted strictly *à la mode*.

AGNES.

À la mode?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Behind the settee, looking down upon her.*] Mr. Cleeve in one quarter of the house, Mrs. Cleeve in another.

AGNES.

Oh, yes.

ST. OLPHERTS.

A proper aspect to the world, combined with freedom on both sides. It's a more decorous system than the aggressive Free Union you once advocated; and it's much in vogue at my end of the town.

AGNES.

Your plan was a little more subtle than I gave you credit for. This was to be your method of getting rid of me!

ST. OLPHERTS.

No, no. Don't you understand? With regard to yourself, we could have arrived at a compromise.

AGNES.

A compromise?

ST. OLPHERTS.

It would have made us quite happy to see you placed upon a—upon a somewhat different footing.

AGNES.

What kind of—footing?

ST. OLPHERTS.

The suburban villa, the little garden, a couple of discreet servants—everything *à la mode*.

[There is a brief pause. Then she rises and walks across the room, outwardly calm but twisting her hands.]

AGNES

Well, you've had Mr. Cleeve's answer to *that*.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Yes.

AGNES.

Which finally disposes of the whole matter—disposes of it——

ST. OLPHERTS.

Completely. [*Struck by an idea.*] Unless you——

AGNES.

[*Turning to him.*] Unless I——

ST. OLPHERTS.

Unless you——

AGNES.

[*After a moment's pause.*] What did Lucas say to you when you——?

ST. OLPHERTS.

He said he knew you'd never make that sacrifice for him. [*She pulls herself up rigidly.*] So he declined to pain you by asking you to do it.

AGNES.

[*Crossing swiftly to the settee, and speaking straight into his face.*] That's a lie!

ST. OLPHERTS.

Keep your temper, my dear.

AGNES.

[*Passionately.*] His love may not last—it won't!—
but at this moment he loves me better than that!
He wouldn't make a mere light thing of me!

ST. OLPHERTS.

Wouldn't he? You try him!

AGNES.

What!

ST. OLPHERTS.

You put him to the test!

AGNES.

[*With her hands to her brows.*] Oh——!

ST. OLPHERTS.

No, no—don't!

AGNES.

[*Faintly.*] Why?

ST. OLPHERTS.

I like you. Damn *him*—you deserve to live your hour!

LUCAS *enters with a letter in his hand.* AGNES *sits.*

LUCAS.

[*Giving St. OLPHERTS the letter.*] Thanks.

[*St. OLPHERTS pockets the letter and picks up his cloak, LUCAS assisting him.*]

AGNES.

[*Outwardly calm.*] Oh—Lucas——

LUCAS.

Yes?

AGNES.

The Duke has been—has been—telling me——

LUCAS.

What, dear?

AGNES.

The sort of arrangement proposed for your going back to London.

LUCAS.

Oh, my brother's brilliant idea!

AGNES.

Acquiesced in by your wife.

[ST. OLPHERTS *strolls away from them.*

LUCAS.

Certainly; as I anticipated, she has become intensely dissatisfied with her position.

AGNES.

And it would be quite possible, it seems, for you to resume your old career?

LUCAS.

Just barely possible—well, for the moment, quite possible.

AGNES.

Quite possible.

LUCAS.

I haven't, formally, made a sign to my political friends yet. It's a task one leaves to the last. I shall do so now—at once. My people have been busying themselves, it appears, in reporting that I shall return to London directly my health is fully re-established.

AGNES.

In the hope——? Oh, yes.

LUCAS.

Hoping they'd be able to separate us before it was too—too late.

AGNES.

Which hope they've now relinquished?

LUCAS.

Apparently.

AGNES.

They're prepared to accept a—a compromise, I hear?

LUCAS.

Ha!—yes.

AGNES.

A compromise in my favour?

LUCAS.

[*Hesitatingly.*] They suggest——

AGNES.

Yes, yes, I know. [*Looking at him searchingly.*]

After all, your old career was—a success. You made your mark, as you were saying the other day. You did make your mark. [*He walks up and down restlessly, abstractedly, her eyes following him.*] You were generally spoken of, accepted, as a Coming Man. *The Coming Man*, often, wasn't it?

LUCAS.

[*With an impatient wave of the hand.*] That doesn't matter!

AGNES.

And now you are giving it up—giving it all up.

[*He sits on the settee, resting his elbow on his knee, pushing his hand through his hair.*]

LUCAS.

But—but you believe I shall succeed equally well in this new career of mine?

AGNES.

[*Stonily.*] There's the risk, you must remember.

LUCAS.

Obviously, there's the risk. Why do you say all this to me now?

AGNES.

Because *now* is the opportunity to—to go back.

LUCAS.

[*Scornfully.*] Opportunity——?

AGNES.

An excellent one. You're so strong and well now.

LUCAS.

Thanks to you.

AGNES.

[*Staring before her.*] Well—I did nurse you carefully, didn't I?

LUCAS.

But I don't understand you. You are surely not proposing to—to—break with me?

AGNES.

No—I—I—I was only thinking that you—you might see something in this suggestion of a compromise.

[LUCAS glances at ST. OLPHERTS, whose back is turned to them. ST. OLPHERTS instinctively looks round, then goes and sits by the window.]

LUCAS.

[*Looking at her searchingly.*] Well, but—you——?

AGNES.

[*With assumed indifference.*] Oh, I——

LUCAS.

You?

AGNES.

Lucas, don't—don't make *me* paramount.

[*He moves to the end of the settee, showing by a look that he desires her to sit by him. After a moment's hesitation she takes her place beside him.*]

LUCAS.

[*In an undertone.*] I do make you paramount. I do. My dear girl, under any circumstances you would still be everything to me—always. [*She nods with a vacant look.*] There would have to be this pretence of an establishment of mine—that would have to be faced; the whited sepulchre, the mockery of dinners and receptions and so on. But it would be to you I should fly for sympathy, encouragement, rest.

AGNES.

Even if you were ill again——

LUCAS.

Even then, if it were practicable—if it could be—
if it——

AGNES.

[*Looking him in the face.*] Well——?

LUCAS.

[*Avoiding her gaze.*] Yes, dear?

AGNES.

What do you say, then, to asking the Duke to give
you back that letter to your brother?

LUCAS.

It wouldn't settle matters, simply destroying that
letter. Sandford begs me to go round to the Danieli
to-night, to—to——

AGNES.

To see him? [LUCAS *nods.*] And her? [*He
shrugs his shoulders.*] At what time? Was any
time specified?

LUCAS.

Half-past nine.

AGNES.

I—I haven't my watch on.

LUCAS.

[*Referring to his watch.*] Nine twenty-five.

AGNES.

You can almost manage it—if you'd like to go.

LUCAS.

Oh, let them wait a few minutes for me; that won't hurt them.

AGNES.

[*Dazed.*] Let me see—I did fetch your hat and coat——

[*She rises and walks mechanically, stumbling against a chair. LUCAS looks up, alarmed; ST. OLPHERTS rises.*]

AGNES.

[*Replacing the chair.*] It's all right; I didn't notice this. [*Bringing LUCAS's hat and coat, and assisting him with the latter.*] How long will you be?

LUCAS.

Not more than half an hour. An hour at the outside.

AGNES.

[*Arranging his neckhandkerchief.*] Keep this so.

LUCAS.

Er—if—if I—if we——

AGNES.

The Duke is waiting.

[LUCAS turns away, and joins ST. OLPHERTS.

LUCAS.

[*To him, in a low voice.*] I am going back to the hotel with you.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh, are you?

[*The door opens and FORTUNÉ enters, followed by AMOS WINTERFIELD. FORTUNÉ retires.*

AMOS.

[*To LUCAS, sternly.*] Is my sister still here, may I ask?

[LUCAS looks to AGNES interrogatively. She inclines her head.

AMOS.

I should like her to know that I am waiting for her. [AGNES goes out.]

LUCAS.

[To AMOS.] Pray excuse me.

[AMOS draws back. ST. OLPHERTS passes out.]

At the door, LUCAS pauses, and bows slightly to AMOS, who returns his bow in the same fashion; then LUCAS follows ST. OLPHERTS. GERTRUDE enters, wearing her hat and mantle. AGNES follows; her movements are unsteady, and there is a wild look in her eyes.

GERTRUDE.

You've come to fetch me, Amos?

[He assents by a nod.]

AMOS.

[To AGNES.] I'm sorry to learn from Dr. Kirke that you've been ill. I hope you're better.

AGNES.

[Turning away, GERTRUDE watching her.] Thank you, I am quite well.

AMOS.

[*Gruffly.*] Are you ready, Gertrude?

GERTRUDE.

No, dear, not yet. I want you to help me.

AMOS.

In what way?

GERTRUDE.

I want you to join me in persuading Mrs. Ebbsmith—*my friend*, Mrs. Ebbsmith—to come to Ketherick with me.

AMOS.

My dear sister——!

GERTRUDE.

[*Firmly.*] Please, Amos!

AGNES.

Stop a moment! Mr. Winterfield, your sister doesn't in the least understand how matters are with me. I am returning to England, but with Mr. Cleeve. [*Recklessly.*] Oh, you'd hear of it eventually! He is reconciled to his wife.

GERTRUDE.

Oh——! Then, surely, you——!

AGNES.

No. The reconciliation goes no further than mere outward appearances. He relies upon me as much as ever. [*Beating her hands together passionately.*] He can't spare me—can't spare me!

AMOS.

[*In a low voice to GERTRUDE.*] Are you satisfied?

GERTRUDE.

I suspected something of the kind. [*Going to AGNES, gripping her wrist tightly.*] Pull yourself out of the mud! Get up out of the mud!

AGNES.

I have no will to—no desire to!

GERTRUDE.

You mad thing!

AGNES.

[*Releasing herself, facing GERTRUDE and AMOS.*] You are only breaking in upon my hour.

GERTRUDE.

Your hour—— ?

AGNES.

[*Waving them away.*] I ask you to go—to go !

[GERTRUDE *returns to* AMOS.]

AMOS.

My dear Gertrude, you see what our position is here. If Mrs. Ebbsmith asks for our help it is our duty to give it.

GERTRUDE.

It is especially *my* duty, Amos.

AMOS.

And I should have thought it especially mine. However, Mrs. Ebbsmith appears to firmly decline our help. And at this point, I confess, I would rather you left it—*you*, at least.

GERTRUDE.

You would rather *I* left it—I, the virtuous, unsoiled woman ! Yes, I am a virtuous woman, Amos ; and it strikes you as odd, I suppose, my insisting upon friendship with her. But look here, both of you.

I'll tell you a secret. You never knew it, Amos, my dear. I never allowed anybody to suspect it——

AMOS.

Never knew what ?

GERTRUDE.

The sort of married life *mine* was. It didn't last long, but it was dreadful, almost intolerable.

AMOS.

Gertrude !

GERTRUDE.

After the first few weeks—weeks, not months!—after the first few weeks of it, my husband treated me as cruelly—[*turning to AGNES*—just as cruelly, I do believe, as your husband treated *you*. [*Amos makes a movement, showing astonishment.*] Wait! Now, then! There was another man—one I loved—one I couldn't help loving! I could have found release with him, perhaps happiness of a kind. I resisted, came through it. They're dead—the two are dead! And here I am, a virtuous, reputable woman; saved by the blessed mercy of Heaven! There, you are not surprised any longer, Amos! [*Pointing to AGNES.*] “My friend, Mrs. Ebbsmith!” [*Bursting into tears.*] Oh!

Oh, if my little boy had been spared to me, he should have grown up tender to women—tender to women ! he should, he should—— !

[She sits upon the settee, weeping. There is a short silence.]

AMOS.

Mrs. Ebbsmith, when I came here to-night I was angry with Gertrude—not altogether, I hope, for being in your company. But I was certainly angry with her for visiting you without my knowledge. I think I sometimes forget that she is eight-and-twenty, not eighteen. Well, now I offer to delay our journey home for a few days, if you hold out the faintest hope that her companionship is likely to aid you in any way.

[AGNES, standing motionless, makes no response.]

AMOS crosses to her, and as he passes GERTRUDE, he lets his hand drop over her shoulder ; she clasps it, then rises and moves to a chair, where she sits, crying silently.

AMOS.

[By AGNES'S side—in a low voice.] You heard what she said. Saved by the mercy of Heaven.

AGNES.

Yes, but she can feel that.

AMOS.

You felt so once.

AGNES.

Once——!

AMOS.

You have, in years gone by, asked for help upon your knees.

AGNES.

It never came.

AMOS.

Repeat your cry!

AGNES.

There would be no answer.

AMOS.

Repeat it!

AGNES.

[*Turning upon him.*] If miracles *could* happen! If “help,” as you term it, *did* come! Do you know what “help” would mean to *me*?

AMOS.

What—— ?

AGNES.

It would take the last crumb from me !

AMOS.

This man's—protection ?

AGNES.

[*Defiantly.*] Yes !

AMOS.

Oh, Mrs. Ebbsmith—— !

AGNES.

[*Pointing to the door.*] Well, I've asked you both to leave me, haven't I ! [*Pointing at GERTRUDE, who has risen.*] The man *she* loves is dead and gone ! She can moralise—— ! [*Sitting, beating upon the settee with her hands.*] Leave me !

[AMOS joins GERTRUDE.

GERTRUDE.

We'll go, Amos.

[*He takes from his pocket a small leather-bound book ; the cover is well-worn and shabby.*

AMOS.

[*Writing upon the fly-leaf of the book with a pencil.*]
I am writing our address here, Mrs. Ebbsmith.

AGNES.

[*In a hard voice.*] I already have it.

[*GERTRUDE glances at the book over AMOS's shoulder, and looks at him wonderingly.*

AMOS.

[*Laying the book on the settee by AGNES's side.*] You might forget it.

[*She stares at the book, with knitted brows, for a moment, then stretches out her hand and opens it.*

AGNES.

[*Withdrawing her hand sharply.*] No—I don't accept your gift.

AMOS.

The address of two friends is upon the fly-leaf.

AGNES.

I thank both of you; but you shall never be troubled again by me. [*Rising, pointing to the book.*]

Take that away ! [*Sitting facing the stove, the door of which she opens, replenishing the fire—excitedly.*] Mr. Cleeve may be back soon ; it would be disagreeable to you all to meet again.

[*GERTRUDE gently pushes AMOS aside, and picking up the book from the settee, places it upon the table.*

GERTRUDE.

[*To AGNES, pointing to the book.*] This frightens you. Simple print and paper, so you pretend to regard it ; but *it frightens you*. [*With a quick movement, AGNES twists her chair round and faces GERTRUDE fiercely.*] I called you a mad thing just now. A week ago I did think you half-mad—a poor, ill-used creature, a visionary, a moral woman living immorally ; yet, in spite of all, a woman to be loved and pitied. But now I'm beginning to think that you're only frail—wanton. Oh, you're not so mad as not to know you're wicked ! [*Tapping the book forcibly.*] And so this frightens you.

AGNES.

You're right ! Wanton ! That's what I've become ! And I'm in my right senses, as you say. I suppose I *was* mad once for a little time, years ago. And do

you know what drove me so? [*Striking the book with her fist.*] It was *that—that!*

GERTRUDE.

That!

AGNES.

I'd trusted in it, clung to it, and it failed me. Never once did it stop my ears to the sounds of a curse; when I was beaten it didn't make the blows a whit the lighter; it never healed my bruised flesh, my bruised spirit! Yes, that drove me distracted for a while; but I'm sane now—*now* it is *you* that are mad, mad to believe! You foolish people, not to know—[*beating her breast and forehead*]*—that Hell or Heaven is here and here!* [*Pointing to the book.*] Take it!

[*GERTRUDE turns away and joins AMOS, and they walk quickly to the door.*]

AGNES.

[*Frantically.*] I'll not endure the sight of it——!

[*As they reach the door, GERTRUDE looks back and sees AGNES hurl the book into the fire. They go out. AGNES starts to her feet and stands motionless for a moment, her head*

bent, her fingers twisted in her hair. Then she raises her head; the expression of her face has changed to a look of fright and horror. Uttering a loud cry, she hastens to the stove, and, thrusting her arm into the fire, drags out the book. GERTRUDE and AMOS re-enter quickly in alarm.

GERTRUDE.

Agnes——!

[They stand looking at AGNES, who is kneeling upon the ground, clutching the charred book.

END OF THE THIRD ACT.

THE FOURTH ACT

The Scene is an apartment in the Campo San Bartolomeo. The walls are of plaster ; the ceiling is frescoed in cheap modern Italian fashion. At the end of the room is a door leading to AGNES'S bedroom ; to the left is an exit on to a landing, while a nearer door, on the same side, opens into another room. The furniture and the few objects attached to the walls are characteristic of a moderate-priced Venetian lodging. Placed about the room, however, are photographs in frames and pretty knick-knacks personal to GERTRUDE, and a travelling-trunk and bag are also to be seen. The shutters of the two nearer windows are closed ; a broad stream of moonlight, coming through the further window, floods the upper part of the room.

HEPHZIBAH, a grey-haired north-country woman dressed as a lady's maid, is collecting the knick-knacks and placing them in the travelling-bag.

After a moment or two, GERTRUDE enters by the further door.

GERTRUDE.

[*At the partly-closed door, speaking into the further room.*] I'll come back to you in a little while, Agnes. [*Closing the door, and addressing HEPHZIBAH.*] How are you getting on, Heppy?

HEPHZIBAH.

A' reet, Miss Gerty. I'm puttin' together a' the sma' knick-knacks, to lay them wi' the claes i' th' trunks.

GERTRUDE.

[*Taking some photographs from the table and bringing them to HEPHZIBAH.*] We leave here at a quarter to eight in the morning; not a minute later.

HEPHZIBAH.

Aye. Will there be much to pack for Mistress Cleeve?

GERTRUDE.

Nothing at all. Besides her hand-bag, she has only the one box.

HEPHZIBAH.

[*Pointing to the trunk.*] Nay, nobbut that thing!

GERTRUDE.

Yes, nobbut that. I packed that for her at the Palazzo.

HEPHZIBAH.

Eh, it won't gi' us ower much trouble to maid Mistress Cleeve when we get her hame.

GERTRUDE.

Heppy, we are not going to call—my friend—
“Mrs. Cleeve.”

HEPHZIBAH.

Nay! what will thee call her?

GERTRUDE.

I'll tell you—by-and-bye. Remember, she must never, never be reminded of the name.

HEPHZIBAH.

Aye, I'll be maist carefu'. Poor leddy! After the way she tended that husband o' hers in Florence neet and day, neet and day!

GERTRUDE.

The world's full of unhappiness, Heppy.

HEPHZIBAH.

The world's full o' husbands. I canna' bide 'em. They're true enough when they're ailin'—but a lass can't keep her Jo always sick. Hey, Miss Gerty! Do forgi'e your auld Heppy!

GERTRUDE.

For what?

HEPHZIBAH.

Why, your own man, so I've heered, ne'er had as much as a bit headache till he caught his fever and died o't.

GERTRUDE.

No, I never knew Captain Thorpe to complain of an ache or a pain.

HEPHZIBAH.

And *he* was a rare, bonny husband to thee, if a' tales be true.

GERTRUDE.

Yes, Heppy. [*Listening, startled.*] Who's this?

HEPHZIBAH.

[*Going and looking.*] Maister Amos.[AMOS *enters briskly.*

AMOS.

[*To GERTRUDE.*] How is she ?

GERTRUDE.

[*Assisting him to remove his overcoat.*] More as she
used to be—so still, so gentle. She's reading.

AMOS.

[*Looking at her significantly.*] Reading ?

GERTRUDE.

Reading.

[*He sits, humming a tune, while HEPPY takes off
his shoes and gives him his slippers.*

HEPHZIBAH.

Eh, Maister Amos, it's good to see thee sae glad-
some.

AMOS.

Home, Heppy, home !

HEPHZIBAH.

Aye, hame!

AMOS.

With our savings!

HEPHZIBAH.

Thy savings——!

AMOS.

Tsch! get on with your packing.

[HEPHZIBAH goes out, carrying the travelling-bag and AMOS's shoes. He exchanges the coat he is wearing for a shabby little black jacket which GERTRUDE brings him.]

GERTRUDE.

[*Filling AMOS's pipe*] Well, dear! Go on!

AMOS.

Well, I've seen them.

GERTRUDE.

Them——

AMOS.

The Duke and Sir Sandford Cleeve.

GERTRUDE.

At the hotel

AMOS.

I found them sitting together in the hall, smoking, listening to some music.

GERTRUDE.

Quite contented with the arrangement they believed they had brought about.

AMOS.

Apparently so. Especially the Baronet—a poor, cadaverous creature.

GERTRUDE.

Where was Mr. Cleeve

AMOS.

He had been there, had an interview with his wife, and departed.

GERTRUDE.

Then by this time he has discovered that Mrs. Ebbsmith has left him ?

AMOS.

I suppose so.

GERTRUDE.

Well, well ! the Duke and the cadaverous Baronet ?

AMOS.

Oh, I told them I considered it my duty to let them know that the position of affairs had suddenly become altered—[*she puts his pipe in his mouth, and strikes a match.*]—that, in point of fact, Mrs. Ebbsmith had ceased to be an element in their scheme for re-establishing Mr. Cleeve's household.

GERTRUDE.

[*Holding a light to his pipe.*] Did they inquire as to her movements?

AMOS.

The Duke did—guessed we had taken her.

GERTRUDE.

What did they say to that?

AMOS.

The Baronet asked me whether I was the chaplain of a Home for—[*angrily*]—ah!

GERTRUDE.

Brute! And then?

AMOS.

Then they suggested that I ought hardly to leave

them to make the necessary explanation to their relative, Mr. Lucas Cleeve.

GERTRUDE.

Yes—well?

AMOS.

I replied that I fervently hoped I should never set eyes on their relative again.

GERTRUDE.

[*Gleefully.*] Ha !

AMOS.

But that Mrs. Ebbsmith had left a letter behind her at the Palazzo Arconati, addressed to that gentleman, which I presumed contained as full an explanation as he could desire.

GERTRUDE.

Oh, Amos—— !

AMOS.

Eh ?

GERTRUDE.

You're mistaken there, dear ; it was no letter.

AMOS.

No letter—— ?

GERTRUDE.

Simply four shakily-written words.

AMOS.

Only four words!

GERTRUDE.

“My—hour—is—over.”

HEPHZIBAH *enters with a card on a little tray.* GERTRUDE *reads the card and utters an exclamation.*

GERTRUDE.

[*Taking the card and speaking under her breath.*]
Amos!

[*He goes to her ; they stare at the card together.*

AMOS.

[*To* HEPHZIBAH.] Certainly!

[HEPHZIBAH *goes out, then returns with the*
DUKE OF ST. OLPHERTS, *and retires.* ST.
OLPHERTS *bows graciously to* GERTRUDE
and more formally to AMOS.]

AMOS.

Pray, sit down.

[ST. OLPHERTS *seats himself on the settee.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh, my dear sir!—if I may use such an expression in your presence—here is the devil to pay!

AMOS.

[To ST. OLPHERTS.] You don't mind my pipe. [ST. OLPHERTS *waves a hand pleasantly.*] And I don't mind your expression—[*sitting by the table*!—the devil to pay?

ST. OLPHERTS.

This, I daresay well-intentioned, interference of yours has brought about some very unpleasant results. Mr. Cleeve returns to the Palazzo Arconati and finds that Mrs. Ebbsmith has flown.

AMOS.

That result, at least, was inevitable.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Whereupon he hurries back to the Danieli and denounces us all for a set of conspirators.

AMOS.

Your Grace doesn't complain of the injustice of that charge?

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Smilingly.*] No, no, *I* don't complain. But the brother—the wife! Just when they imagined they had bagged the truant—there's the sting!

GERTRUDE.

Oh, then Mr. Cleeve now refuses to carry out his part of the shameful arrangement?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Absolutely. [*Rising, taking a chair, and placing it by the settee.*] Come into this, dear Mrs. Thorn——!

AMOS.

Thorpe.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Come into this! [*Sitting again.*] *You* understand the sort of man we have to deal with in Mr. Cleeve.

GERTRUDE.

[*Sitting*] A man who prizes a woman when he has lost her.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Precisely.

GERTRUDE.

Men don't relish, I suppose, being cast off by women.

ST. OLPHERTS

It's an inversion of the picturesque; the male abandoned is not a pathetic figure. At any rate, our poor Lucas is now raving fidelity to Mrs. Ebbsmith.

GERTRUDE.

[*Indignantly.*] Ah——!

ST. OLPHERTS.

If you please, he cannot, will not, exist without her. Reputation, fame, fortune are nothing when weighed against—Mrs. Ebbsmith. And we may go to perdition, so that he recovers—Mrs. Ebbsmith.

AMOS.

Well—to be plain—you're not asking us to sympathise with Mrs. Cleeve and her brother-in-law over their defeat?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Certainly not. All I ask, Mr. Winterfield, is that you will raise no obstacle to a meeting between Mrs. Cleeve and—and——

GERTRUDE.

No!

[ST. OLPHERTS *signifies assent*; GERTRUDE
makes a movement.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*To her.*] Don't go.

AMOS.

The object of such a meeting?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Mrs. Cleeve desires to make a direct, personal appeal
to Mrs. Ebbsmith.

GERTRUDE.

Oh, what kind of woman can this Mrs. Cleeve be!

ST. OLPHERTS.

A woman of character, who sets herself to accom-
plish a certain task——

GERTRUDE.

Character!

AMOS.

Hush, Gerty!

ST. OLPHERTS.

And who gathers her skirts tightly round her and gently tip-toes into the mire.

AMOS.

To put it clearly: in order to get her unfaithful husband back to London, Mrs. Cleeve would deliberately employ this weak, unhappy woman as a lure.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Perhaps Mrs. Cleeve is an unhappy woman.

GERTRUDE.

What work for a wife !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Wife—nonsense ! She is only married to Cleeve.

AMOS.

[*Walking up and down.*] It is proposed that this meeting should take place—when ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

I have brought Sir Sandford and Mrs. Cleeve with me. [*Pointing towards the outer door.*] They are——

AMOS.

If I decline ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

It's known you leave for Milan at a quarter to nine in the morning ; there might be some sort of foolish, inconvenient scene at the station.

AMOS.

Surely your Grace—— ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh, no, *I* shall be in bed at that hour. I mean, between the women, perhaps—and Mr. Cleeve. Come, come, sir, you can't abduct Mrs. Ebbsmith—nor can we. Nor must you gag her. [*AMOS appears angry and perplexed.*] Pray be reasonable. Let her speak out for herself—here, finally—and settle the business. Come, sir, come !

AMOS.

[*Going to GERTRUDE and speaking in a low voice.*] Ask her. [*GERTRUDE goes out.*] Cleeve ! Where is he while this poor creature's body and soul are being played for ? You have told him that she is with us ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

No, *I* haven't.

AMOS.

He must suspect it.

ST. OLPHERTS.

Well, candidly, Mr. Winterfield, Mr. Cleeve is just now employed in looking for Mrs. Ebbsmith elsewhere.

AMOS.

Elsewhere ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Sir Sandford recognised that, in his brother's present mood, the young man's presence might be prejudicial to the success of these delicate negotiations.

AMOS.

So some lie has been told him, to keep him out of the way ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Now, Mr. Winterfield—— !

AMOS.

Good heavens ! Duke—forgive me for my rough-

ness—you appear to be fouling your hands, all of you, with some relish !

ST. OLPHERTS.

I must trouble you to address remarks of that nature to Sir Sandford Cleeve. I am no longer a prime mover in the affair. I am simply standing by.

AMOS.

But how can you “stand by” ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Confound it, sir, if you will trouble yourself to rescue people, there is a man to be rescued here as well as a woman ; a man, by the way, who is a—a sort of relative of mine.

AMOS.

The woman first !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Not always. You can rescue this woman in a few weeks’ time ; it can make no difference.

AMOS.

[*Indignantly.*] Ah—— !

ST. OLPHERTS.

Oh, you are angry !

AMOS.

I beg your pardon. One word. I assure your Grace that I truly believe this wretched woman is at a fatal crisis in her life. I believe that if I lose her now there is every chance of her slipping back into a misery and despair out of which it will be impossible to drag her. Oh, I'll be perfectly open with you. At this moment we—my sister and I—are not sure of her. Her affection for this man may still induce her to sacrifice herself utterly for him ; she is still in danger of falling to the lowest depth a woman can attain. Come, Duke, don't help these people. And don't "stand by !" Help me and my sister. For God's sake !

ST. OLPHERTS.

My good Mr. Winterfield, believe me or not, I—I positively like this woman.

AMOS.

[*Gladly.*] Ah !

ST. OLPHERTS.

She attracts me curiously. And if she wanted assistance——

AMOS.

Doesn't she ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Money——

AMOS.

No, no.

ST. OLPHERTS.

She should have it. But as for the rest—well——

AMOS.

Well ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

Well, sir, you must understand me. It is a failing of mine ; I can't approach women—I never could—in the missionary spirit.

GERTRUDE *re-enters ; the men turn to face her.*

AMOS.

[*To GERTRUDE.*] Will she—— ?

GERTRUDE.

Yes. [ST. OLPHERTS *limps out of the room, bowing to GERTRUDE as he passes.*] Oh, Amos !

AMOS.

Are we to lose the poor soul after all, Gerty ?

GERTRUDE.

I—I can't think so. Oh ! but I'm afraid.

ST. OLPHERTS *returns, and* SIR SANDFORD CLEEVE *enters with* SYBIL CLEEVE. SANDFORD *is a long, lean, old-young man with a pinched face. SYBIL is a stately, handsome young woman, beautifully gowned and thickly veiled.*

ST. OLPHERTS.

Mrs. Thorpe—Mr. Winterfield.

[SANDFORD *and* SYBIL *bow distantly to* GERTRUDE *and* AMOS.

AMOS.

[*To* SANDFORD *and* SYBIL, *indicating the settee.*] Will you——? [SYBIL *sits on settee ;* SANDFORD *takes the chair beside her.*] Gertrude——

[GERTRUDE *goes out.*

SIR SANDFORD.

[*Pompously.*] Mr. Winterfield, I find myself engaged upon a peculiarly distasteful task.

AMOS.

I have no hope, Sir Sandford, that you will not have strength to discharge it.

SIR SANDFORD.

We shall object to loftiness of attitude on your part, sir. You would do well to reflect that we are seeking to restore a young man to a useful and honourable career.

AMOS.

You are using very honourable means, Sir Sandford.

SIR SANDFORD.

I shall protest against any perversion of words, Mr. Winterfield——

The door of the further room opens, and GERTRUDE comes in, then AGNES. The latter is in a rusty, ill-fitting, black, stuff dress; her hair is tightly drawn from her brows; her face is haggard, her eyes are red and sunken. A strip of linen binds her right hand.

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*Speaking into SYBIL's ear.*] The lean witch again !
The witch of the Iron Hall at St. Luke's.

SYBIL.

[*In a whisper.*] Is *that* the woman ?

ST. OLPHERTS.

You see only one of 'em—there are *two* there.

[SANDFORD rises as AGNES comes slowly forward accompanied by GERTRUDE. AMOS joins GERTRUDE; and they go together into the adjoining room, GERTRUDE giving AGNES an appealing look.]

SIR SANDFORD.

[To AGNES.] I—I am Mr. Lucas Cleeve's brother—
[with a motion of the hand towards SYBIL]—this is—
this is——

[He swallows the rest of the announcement and retires to the back of the room, where he stands before the stove. ST. OLPHERTS strolls away and disappears.]

SYBIL.

[To AGNES, in a hard, dry, disdainful voice.] I beg that 'you will sit down. [AGNES sits mechanically, with an expressionless face.] I—I don't need to be told that this is a very—a very unwomanly proceeding on my part.

SIR SANDFORD.

I can't regard it in that light, under the peculiar circumstances.

SYBIL.

I'd rather you wouldn't interrupt me, Sandford. [*To AGNES.*] But the peculiar circumstances, to borrow my brother-in-law's phrase, are not such as develop sweetness and modesty, I suppose.

SIR SANDFORD.

Again I say you wrong yourself there, Sybil——

SYBIL.

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, please let me wrong myself, for a change. [*To AGNES.*] When my husband left me, and I heard of his association with you, I felt sure that his vanity would soon make an openly irregular life intolerable to him. Vanity is the cause of a great deal of virtue in men; the vainest are those who like to be thought respectable.

SIR SANDFORD.

Really, I must protest——

SYBIL.

But Lady Cleeve—the mother—and the rest of the family have not had the patience to wait for the fulfilment of my prophecy. And so I have been forced to undertake this journey.

SIR SANDFORD.

I demur to the expression “forced,” Sybil——

SYBIL.

Cannot we be left alone? Surely——! [SANDFORD bows stiffly and moves away, following.] ST. OLPHERTS.] However—there’s this to be said for them, poor people—whatever is done to save my husband’s prospects in life must be done *now*. It is no longer possible to play fast and loose with friends and supporters—to say nothing of enemies. His future now rests upon a matter of days—hours almost. [*Rising and walking about agitatedly.*] That is why I am sent here—well, why I *am* here.

AGNES.

[*In a low quavering voice.*] What is it you are all asking me to do now?

SYBIL.

We are asking you to continue to—to exert your influence over him for a little while longer.

AGNES.

[*Rising unsteadily*] Ah——! [*She makes a movement to go, falters, and irresolutely sits again.*] My influence—mine!

SYBIL.

[*With a stamp of the foot.*] You wouldn't underrate your power if you had seen him, heard him, about an hour ago—[*mockingly*] after he had discovered his bereavement.

AGNES.

He will soon forget *me*.

SYBIL.

Yes—if you don't forsake him.

AGNES.

I am going to England, into Yorkshire; according to your showing, that should draw him back.

SYBIL.

Oh, I've no doubt we shall hear of him—in York-

shire! You'll find him dangling about your skirts in Yorkshire!

AGNES.

And *he* will find that I am determined—strong.

SYBIL.

Ultimately he will tire, of course. But when? And what assurance have we that he returns to us when he has wearied of pursuing you? Besides, don't I tell you that we must make sure of him *now*? It's of no use his begging us, in a month's time, to patch up home and reputation. It must be *now*—and *you* can end our suspense. Come, hideous as it sounds, this is not much to ask.

AGNES.

[*Shrinking from her.*] Oh——!

SYBIL.

Oh, don't regard me as the wife! That's an unnecessary sentiment, I pledge you my word. It's a little late in the day, too, for such considerations. So, come, help us!

AGNES.

I will not.

SYBIL.

He has an old mother——

AGNES.

Poor woman !

SYBIL.

And remember, *you* took him away—— !

AGNES.

I !

SYBIL.

Practically you did—with your tender nursing and sweet compassion. Isn't it straining a point—to shirk bringing him back ?

AGNES.

[*Rising.*] I did not take him from you. You—you sent him to me.

SYBIL.

Ho, yes ! that tale has been dinned into your ears often enough, I can quite believe. *I* sent him to you—my coldness, heartlessness, selfishness sent him to you. The unsympathetic wife—eh ? Yes, but you didn't put yourself to the trouble of asking for *my*

version of the story before you mingled your woes with his. [AGNES *faces her suddenly.*] You know him now. Have I been altogether to blame, do you still think? Unsympathetic! Because I've so often had to tighten my lips, and stare blankly over his shoulder, to stop myself from crying out in weariness of his vanity and pettiness? Cruel! Because, occasionally, patience became exhausted at the mere contemplation of a man so thoroughly, greedily self-absorbed? Why, *you* married miserably, the Duke of St. Olpherts tells us! Before you made yourself my husband's champion and protector, why didn't you let your experience speak a word for *me*? [AGNES *quickly turns away and sits upon the settee, her hands to her brow.*] However, I didn't come here to revile you. [*Standing by her.*] They say that you're a strange woman—not the sort of woman one generally finds doing such things as you have done; a woman with odd ideas. I hear—oh, I'm willing to believe it!—that there's good in you.

[AGNES *breaks into a low peal of hysterical laughter.*

AGNES.

Who tells you—that?

SYBIL.

The Duke.

AGNES.

Ha, ha, ha! A character—from him! ha, ha, ha!

SYBIL.

[*Her voice and manner softening*] Well, if there is pity in you, help us to get my husband back to London, to his friends, to his old ambitions.

AGNES.

Ha, ha, ha, ha! your husband!

SYBIL.

The word slips out. I swear to you that he and I can never be more to each other than companion figures in a masquerade. The same roof may cover us; but between two wings of a house, as you may know, there often stretches a wide desert. I despise him; he hates me. [*Walking away, her voice breaking.*] Only—I did love him once I don't want to see him utterly thrown away—wasted I don't quite want to see that

[AGNES rises and approaches SYBIL, fearfully.]

AGNES.

[*In a whisper.*] Lift your veil for a moment.
[SYBIL *raises her veil.*] Tears—tears—[*with a deep groan*]*—Oh——!* [SYBIL *turns away.*] I—I'll do it I'll go back to the Palazzo at once [SYBIL *draws herself up suddenly.*] I've wronged you! wronged you! O God! O God!

[*She totters away and goes into her bedroom.*
For a moment or two SYBIL stands still, a look of horror and repulsion upon her face.
Then she turns and goes towards the outer door.

SYBIL.

[*Calling.*] Sandford! Sandford!

[SIR SANDFORD CLEEVE *and the* DUKE of ST.
OLPHERTS *enter.*

SIR SANDFORD.

[*To SYBIL*] Well——?

SYBIL.

She is going back to the Palazzo.

SIR SANDFORD.

You mean that she consents to——?

SYBIL.

[*Stamping her foot.*] I mean that she will go back to the Palazzo. [*Sitting and leaning her head upon her hands.*] Oh! oh!

SIR SANDFORD.

Need we wait longer, then?

SYBIL.

These people—these people who are befriending her! Tell them.

SIR SANDFORD.

Really, it can hardly be necessary to consult——

SYBIL.

[*Fiercely.*] I will have them told! I will have them told!

[SANDFORD goes to the door of the adjoining room and knocks, returning to SYBIL as GERTRUDE and AMOS enter. SYBIL draws down her veil.

GERTRUDE.

[*Looking round.*] Mrs. Ebbsmith——? Mrs. Ebbsmith——!

SIR SANDFORD.

Er—many matters have been discussed with Mrs. Ebbsmith. Undoubtedly she has, for the moment, considerable influence over my brother. She has consented to exert it, to induce him to return at once to London.

AMOS.

I think I understand you !

[AGNES appears at the door of her room dressed
- in bonnet and cloak.

GERTRUDE.

Agnes——!

[AGNES comes forward, stretches out her hand
to GERTRUDE, and throws herself upon the
settee.

SYBIL.

[To SANDFORD, clutching his arm.] Take me away.

[They turn to go.

GERTRUDE.

[To SYBIL.] Mrs. Cleeve——! [Looking down
upon AGNES.] Mrs. Cleeve, we—my brother and I—

hoped to save this woman. She was worth saving. You have utterly destroyed her.

[SYBIL *makes no answer, but walks slowly away with SANDFORD, then stops and turns abruptly.*

SYBIL.

[*With a gasp.*] Oh——! No—I will not accept the service of this wretched woman. I loathe myself for doing what I have done. [*Coming to AGNES.*] Look up! Look at me! [*Proudly—lifting her veil.*] I decline your help—I decline it. [*To GERTRUDE and AMOS.*] You hear me—you—and you? I unsay all that I've said to her. It's too degrading I will not have such an act upon my conscience. [*To AGNES.*] Understand me! If you rejoin this man I shall consider it a fresh outrage upon me. I hope you will keep with your friends.

[GERTRUDE *holds out her hand to SYBIL; SYBIL touches it distantly.*]

AGNES.

[*Clutching at SYBIL's skirts.*] Forgive me! forgive——!

SYBIL.

[*Retreating.*] Ah, please——! [*Turning and con-*

fronting SANDFORD.] Tell your mother I have failed. I am not going back to England.

LUCAS *enters quickly; he and SYBIL come face to face. They stand looking at each other for a moment, then she sweeps past him and goes out. SANDFORD follows her.*

LUCAS.

[*Coming to AGNES.*] Agnes—— [*To AGNES, in rapid, earnest undertones.*] They sent me to the railway station; my brother told me you were likely to leave for Milan to-night. I ought to have guessed sooner that you were in the hands of this meddling parson and his sister. Why has my wife been here——?

AGNES.

[*In a low voice, rocking herself gently to and fro.*] Your wife—your wife——!

LUCAS.

And the others? What scheme is afoot now? Why have you left me? Why didn't you tell me outright that I was putting you to too severe a test? You tempted me, you led me on, to propose that I

should patch up my life in that way. [*She rises, with an expressionless face.*] But it has had one good result. I know now how much I depend upon you. Oh, I have had it all out with myself, pacing up and down that cursed railway station. [*Laying his hand upon her arm and speaking into her ear.*] I don't deceive myself any longer. Agnes, *this* is the great cause of the unhappiness I've experienced of late years—I'm not fit for the fight and press of life. I wear no armour; I am too horribly sensitive. My skin bleeds at a touch; even flattery wounds me. Oh, the wretchedness of it! But *you* can be strong—at your weakest, there is a certain strength in you. With you, in time, I feel *I* shall grow stronger. Only I must withdraw from the struggle for a while; you must take me out of it and let me rest—recover breath, as it were. Come! Forgive me for having treated you ungratefully, almost treacherously. Tomorrow we will begin our search for our new home. Agnes!

AGNES.

I have already found a home.

LUCAS.

Apart from me, you mean?

AGNES.

Apart from you.

LUCAS.

No, no. You'll not do that!

AGNES.

Lucas, this evening, two or three hours ago, you planned out the life we were to lead in the future. We had done with "madness," if you remember; henceforth we were to be "mere man and woman."

LUCAS.

You agreed——

AGNES.

Then. But we hadn't looked at each other clearly then, as mere man and woman. You, the man—what are you? You've confessed——

LUCAS.

I lack strength; I shall gain it.

AGNES.

Never from me—never from me. For what am I? Untrue to myself, as you are untrue to yourself;

false to others, as you are false to others ; passionate, unstable, like yourself ; like yourself, a coward. A coward. *I—I* was to lead women ! *I* was to show them, in your company, how laws—laws made and laws that are natural—may be set aside or slighted ; how men and women may live independent and noble lives without rule, or guidance, or sacrament. *I* was to be the example—the figure set up for others to observe and imitate. But the figure was made of wax—it fell awry at the first hot breath that touched it ! You and I ! What a partnership it has been ! How base, and gross, and wicked, almost from the very beginning ! We know each other now thoroughly—how base and wicked it would remain ! No, go your way, Lucas, and let me go mine.

LUCAS.

Where—where are you going ?

AGNES.

To Ketherick—to think. [*Wringing her hands.*] Ah ! I have to think too, now, of the woman I have wronged.

LUCAS.

Wronged ?

AGNES.

Your wife; the woman I have wronged, who came here to-night, and—spared me. Oh, go !

LUCAS.

Not like this, Agnes ! not like this !

AGNES.

[*Appealingly.*] Gertrude ! [LUCAS looks round—first at GERTRUDE then at AMOS—and, with a hard smile upon his face, turns to go. Suddenly AGNES touches his sleeve.] Lucas, when I have learnt to pray again, I will remember you, every day of my life.

LUCAS

[*Staring at her.*] Pray ! you !

[*She inclines her head twice, slowly ; without another word he walks away and goes out. AGNES sinks upon the settee ; AMOS and GERTRUDE remain, stiffly and silently, in the attitude of people who are waiting for the departure of a disagreeable person.*]

ST. OLPHERTS.

[*After watching LUCAS'S departure.*] Now I wonder

whether, if he hurried to his wife at this moment, repentant, and begged her to relent—I wonder whether—whether she would—whether—[*looking at AMOS and GERTRUDE, a little disconcerted*—]—I beg your pardon—you're not interested?

AMOS.

Frankly, we are not.

ST. OLPHERTS.

No; other people's affairs *are* tedious. [*Producing his gloves.*] Well! A week in Venice—and the weather has been delightful. [*Shaking hands with GERTRUDE, whose expression remains unchanged.*] A pleasant journey! [*Going to AGNES, offering his hand.*] Mrs. Ebbsmith——? [*She lifts her maimed hand.*] Ah! An accident? [*She nods wearily.*] I'm sorry I

[*He turns away and goes out, bowing to AMOS as he passes.*]

THE END.

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